

Jim Henson's™

THE DARK CRYSTAL™

Author
Quest



Introduction by
**Cheryl
Henson**

Featuring stories by
Vinnie Chiappini
Greg Coles
Nancy Gray
J. M. Lee
Esther Palmer



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Dear Readers,

We are thrilled to share the stories from the top five finalists in Jim Henson's The Dark Crystal Author Quest. Each of these authors has written a story set in the rich world of *The Dark Crystal*; they have brought their characters to life with fine detail, and woven complex stories that intrigue us, leaving us longing to hear more. Many of the characters and plots are original, yet they are also consistent with the canon outlined on DarkCrystal.com. We are so pleased with each of these five stories—any one of them could be expanded into a full book. We hope that you like them as much as we do.

What an interesting challenge it must have been to set a new story in a fantasy world that has been created by others. To enter this place and make it your own; to embrace what has been created and keep going with it, making it more textured, more nuanced, and more real. There is nothing more exciting to me than the possibility of expanding on the world that was created by my father, Jim Henson, and illustrator Brian Froud. *The Dark Crystal* was a truly groundbreaking film in its time, and we want to see where it could take us today.

The Dark Crystal was always a unique film. It explored a world unlike our own, yet, like all good fantasy, it was a world that resonated with truth from our own. The Skeksis, the UrRu, the Gelfling, Aughra, and all the bizarre and wonderful creatures and concepts that were in the film are alive to us. There is a tactile depth to the world of *The Dark Crystal* that, for me, has never quite been matched in any other film. It is because of this that one can imagine endless stories continuing to happen there.

One year ago, we discussed holding a competition to find an author who could take us on a new adventure set in this unique world. We were looking for a fresh take on what had been created thirty-three years ago. We launched DarkCrystal.com, and we uploaded the full canon of everything we knew about this world—its lore, lands, language, history: any background information a writer would need to start creating a tale set

in this strange world. We announced the competition at San Diego Comic-Con in July 2013, and we started to receive submissions that fall. By the end of the year, we had nearly 500. The editors at Grosset & Dunlap read all 500, and narrowed them down to a select twenty-five for the judges to review. My sister Lisa Henson, Wendy Froud, and I joined Rob Valois, Francesco Sedita, and Lori Burke to carefully read each of the twenty-five and select five finalists. We were impressed by all twenty-five that we read, many of which are now posted on DarkCrystal.com, but these five stories stood out to us—they were the ones that we fell most in love with.

We requested that all the stories be set in a very specific time period. It is long before the film that we know, in a time before the Gelfling race has been killed off by the Skeksis—a time known as the Gelfling Gathering. There are seven Gelfling clans living across all regions of Thra, each with its own individual characteristics, personality, and culture. The clans are united under a Gelfling Matriarch. While there are rivalries between them, each clan lives in its own relative harmony. The Skeksis do live in the Castle of the Crystal, but their true nature is not yet known to the Gelfling, who believe the Skeksis to be detached-yet-harmless overlords. But the innocence of the Gelfling cannot last—Gelfling are disappearing constantly, and someone has to find out what is happening. The Gelfling may all come from different tribes, but they must face the future together.

Our five finalists have all come from completely different backgrounds, too. They live in five different states, and they wrote five completely different stories with five completely different voices. Yet each of those voices is, in its own way, just right for *The Dark Crystal*. They are individuals as writers, and as people. I loved reading their answers to the question, “What does *The Dark Crystal* mean to me?” Below are a few of my favorite lines.

The most unusual background for a fantasy writer may be that of Vinnie Chiappini, who is an attorney in the US Army in Washington, DC. Vinnie writes, “The artful blend of solemn themes and playful humor in *The Dark Crystal* mirrors how I understand my own identity. On the one

hand, the film is a grave, thoughtful story about an earnest underdog, the lone survivor of a genocide, who must resolve a Manichean battle between mysterious beings. On the other hand, Fizzgig's antics, Aughra's humorous dialogue, and Thra's distinctively 'Jim Henson' feel make the movie a celebration. As a Pentagon lawyer who studied the classics but loves the Muppets and writing fantasy stories about Gelfling, that balance between the serious and the silly speaks to me." I love that last line. You can hear Vinnie's knowledge of ancient Roman military history come through in his characters and appreciate the perspective he brings to his story.

Greg Coles, who is a graduate student at Penn State University, wrote: "I have always been enthralled by worlds not bound by the same rules as planet Earth, worlds where anything might happen and where the whole story hasn't been written yet. For me, the world of *The Dark Crystal* is such a world. I fell in love with Thra because it came alive to me. It stopped feeling like a fiction someone made up and started feeling like another home I used to know." You get a sense that Greg has been around the world and enjoys telling stories from his travels, and that this could be a tale from somewhere that he has really been.

Nancy Grey is a writer, graphic designer and mother in West Columbia, South Carolina, who recalls being truly touched by my father's work. She writes, "*The Dark Crystal* means a great deal to me because it is one of the movies that inspired me as a child, resulting in my major in media arts. It also made me want to write fantasy. The setting was so real that you could almost touch it. As a child, I wanted to work for The Jim Henson Company, and writing for *The Dark Crystal* universe is like fulfilling that dream."

Joseph M. Lee from St. Paul, Minnesota, is deeply saturated in the fantasy genre. He is a novelist, writing mentor, illustrator, and graphic designer. I found his illustrations to be marvelous (check out his website to see fabulous images from books by Neil Gaiman and others). Joseph says that as a writer, he "finds the most rewarding stories in fusion genre, from nostalgic historical fantasies to gritty sci-fi westerns." He writes,

“I’ve always been a fan of dark fantasy, but thinking back on how early it was that *The Dark Crystal* became a part of my VHS library, I wonder which came first: the Skeksis or the egg. Even now, the depth of world and profundity has continued to reveal itself as I grow into my so-called adulthood.” Being an artist, his writing also gives a visual experience, so intricate is the detail. When I read his story, I felt that I could see every leaf and each creature, as though I was watching a film. The imagined cinematography is striking; beautifully lit right on the page.

Esther Palmer from Castle Rock, Colorado, is a young-adult novelist with two published books. She comes from the perspective of a writer more than a fan when she says, “*The Dark Crystal* is a fantasy that explores our human natures in the form of an ‘alien’ world, which makes it easier for us to accept . . . it’s a story of ourselves and our continuing struggle with the different parts of ourselves, and how sometimes the dark side wins, but in the end, the good will triumph.”

Each writer so different; each story so unique. But this competition is not about the writers, it is about the stories that they write, the characters they create, and the plots that they weave. Now it is time for you to enter into the world of *The Dark Crystal*, as re-imagined by our five finalists.

After you read each of these stories, we invite you to visit DarkCrystal.com to share your thoughts and perspectives with other fans. After all, it is the fans who keep this world alive for all of us.

Cheryl Henson

Founder of DarkCrystal.com

Vinnie Chiappini

The Gelfling Guardian

Chapter One

The second sun had reached its height, and Parra needed to hurry. It was no longer safe to be in the fields after the third sun had set. He Parra knelt down over the turblaroots and sang. Though it hadn't rained, the soil looked wet. At first the ground didn't move at all, and Parra was tempted to jam his hands into the mahogany dirt and dig like he had done as a child, when he would follow his father around their fields. As always when he felt such a temptation, he recalled his father's long-ago laughter and chided himself. Instead, he touched his fingers gently against the soil and sang: "*Sī Anonna, sī Anonna, nyeahteetee, nyeahteetee.*"

The soil stirred slightly. Parra saw dirt on his wrist, but he couldn't be sure whether the earth itself had moved or whether he had leaned into it. He sang again: "*Sī Anonna, sī Anonna, nyeahtoomoh, nyeahtoomoh.*" The soil swirled with a sudden, silent magic. Parra kept his fingers still and eyes shut while he continued to sing the ancient Podling hymn to Anonna, Thra's soil spirit. The dirt spiraled deeper until it had made a hole almost two feet deep. An enormous turblaroot waited at the bottom.

Parra leaned into the deep hole, wobbling fitfully on the edge as he snatched at the turblaroot. Then, with a muffled *Yip!* Parra fell in. He tumbled downward, whacking at the sides of the hole all the way, until he landed in a heap at the bottom. He flipped himself over clumsily, and the hole smoothed itself back to its pristine dignity.

"Very well," Parra said, wiping himself off. As he brushed the dirt away, it flew to the walls of the hole like specks of iron to a magnet. He picked up the turblaroot that he had been reaching for and dropped it in his basket. It looked delicious.

A dim jingling distracted Parra from his admiration of the root. With many *oomphs* and several *almost theres*, he climbed out of the hole and

peeked over the tall stalks at the road that bordered his family's field. A lone Gelfling warrior marched confidently down the road.

Next to a Skeksis or one of the Mystics, the Gelfling warrior would have appeared tiny. Yet to a Podling like Parra, the Gelfling was a titan. He was young with dark brown hair down to his shoulders. Beneath his softly sloping forehead, his black eyes were locked on an unknown destination. Gelfling warriors had come to Parra's village before to discuss trade routes or their pledges of mutual protection with the Podlings. Normally they wore simple leather armor. But this Gelfling wore armor like Parra had never seen before. Two ornate silver blades shaped like lightning bolts shot down from the sides of his helmet. His breastplate was a glossy black studded with oval turquoise stones and gold squares. Beneath his armor, he wore a black robe embroidered in purple with elegant geometric designs. Parra was more impressed by the Gelfling's martial flair than fearful of his unusual attire; if anything, the Gelfling seemed more vain than vicious.

"Sir! Mr. Gelfling, sir!" Parra grabbed his basket and bowled along the ground toward the stranger. The warrior plants flattened as Parra moved across them.

Parra, chest out and chin forward, popped out from the field on to the road in front of the Gelfling. He dropped the turblaroot at his feet and stood at attention. "Mr. Gelfling, sir! I am Parra, a Podling from the village of Greggan, the son of Orritch, a warrior whose legend I'm sure you know—he is quite respected in Greggan, and I can only imagine his fame has traveled."

The Gelfling laughed. Parra did not move; he kept his knees straight, his hands cupped loosely at his side, and his mouth strong and serious. He wanted to show this Gelfling that he too was a warrior.

The Gelfling cleared his throat and stood up straight. "Yes, Orritch, of course. Very famous. Fought in the expedition to the north, no?"

"The east, in fact," Parra said proudly.

"Ah, yes. The expedition to the east, tough fighting then—only the bravest of the Podlings were involved."

"What is your name?" Parra asked.

The Gelfling put his hand on Parra's shoulder. "I am Kairn, a Gelfling of the Spriton clan. Where's your village, Parra?"

“Just over that hill. I insist you stay with us. We Podlings are great friends of the Gelfling and are renowned for our hospitality.”

“I am still two days from my home village of Hallis. If it is not an imposition, then please, show me the legendary hospitality of the Podlings of Greggan.”

Parra picked up his turblaroot and dropped it back into his basket, which was tightly woven with blue and black strands. “My basket matches your armor, Kairn!” he said with a smile.

It is good to have another warrior here at last, Parra thought. His countrymen were lazy. They couldn’t swing a bola or manage a sword. They just wanted to sit by the fire drinking ale, playing music, savoring freshly roasted turblaroots, dancing, smiling, and forgetting. They didn’t have the hardy streak that he and Kairn had. He could see it in the proud, stern expression Kairn wore, the same face Parra always thought he wore.

Of course, technically speaking, Parra was not a warrior, but that was merely because he had not been given the opportunity yet: the Podlings had few enemies to fight. Parra was confident, however, that when the day came, he would be ready.

“I’ve never seen a Podling with fields like this, Parra,” Kairn said while surveying the land Parra worked.

Parra knew exactly what he meant. Most Podling fields were a mess—a group of rollasnap here, a cluster of pomintinas trees there, inexplicable holes dotting the soil, baskets piled high nowhere in particular. His fields were an endless sequence of perfect squares, forty feet by forty feet apiece. Each field held a different crop, which Parra identified to Kairn as they walked toward the village.

He pointed toward some tight bushes with golden bulbs that were spaced at exact intervals in parallel rows. “See there? Those are rollasnap. They are delicious with Nebrie milk, and they’re always in season. And over there—” Parra pointed at small green plants standing in a neat grid punctuated occasionally by precisely circular holes “—those are the best turblaroots you’ll ever taste. Just wait till tonight!” He shook his basket excitedly and looked over at some high-canopied trees drooping at the bough from the weight of enormous purple fruits. “Those are pomintinas trees. We used to stand on each other’s shoulders, six Podlings high, to pick their fruit—that is, until we learned the song.”

“The song?” Kairn asked.

“Well, yes, the hymn to Anonna, which Thra obeys. We sing it and the fruit rains down. Would you like to see?”

“They do look delicious. I think I could grab one myself if you don’t mind.”

Parra looked at the branches and then back at Kairn. The lowest branch was twice his height, but he didn’t want to deny his new friend. “Please, go ahead,” he said.

Kairn put down his sword and helmet and rushed at the tree. He leaped high, but his outstretched arm could not even graze the bottom of the fruit. He tried again, then again.

Parra smiled politely. “They look delicious, don’t they?”

Furtively wiping away his sweat, Kairn agreed. “It’s a shame I have been walking so long today. I nearly have it, but my legs are so tired.” He took off his armor. Dressed only in his robe, which was fastened tightly at his waist with a leather belt, he took a longer running start and jumped. With both arms extended, he soared through the air but never came close to reaching the pomintinas. He landed facedown in the field’s humid soil. Parra looked away out of respect, but he couldn’t help but notice Kairn’s frown and muddy robe.

Parra handed Kairn his armor. “The branches are very high during this season, Kairn. Please, allow me. *Sī Anonna, sī Anonna, paminoorah, paminoorahsee.*”

The leaves hummed and the boughs trembled. Kairn looked at the precarious fruit in wordless wonder.

“*Paminoorah, paminoorahsee, shendeemoh, shendeemoh.*” The shaking boughs dropped lower and lower.

“Watch out!” Parra lunged forward to grab Kairn, who had wandered beneath the branches. But he was too late—the tree yielded to the song and rained its fruit on their heads. Even after the fruit had knocked them to the ground, the tree’s bounty wouldn’t cease. Ripe, purple pomintinas pounded down on the pair relentlessly as they rolled away to safety.

Parra crossed his small hands and looked at the ground in front of him. He feared how this proud warrior might react to being defeated by a fruit tree. He glanced up just in time to see a piece of fruit tossed by Kairn

bounce off his hands. Kairn held pomintinas in both hands and smiled at him. “Hungry?” he asked. “I’m eating two.”

Parra crunched into his pomintinas. Once they had finished eating, Kairn and Parra gathered the fruit into Parra’s basket and made a pact not to share their embarrassment with the village.

Once they reached Greggan, the Podlings poured out of their homes to meet the visitor. Orritch emerged from the center of the crowd. A lumpy Podling with squishy cheeks and bright eyes, he did not look like the warrior Parra claimed he was. He was dressed in a simple brown frock, like the other villagers, though he did appear newer. “Stranger, welcome to Greggan. I am Orritch, though I am sure I need no introduction. And what is your name?”

Kairn knelt before Orritch. Now at equal height with the Podling, he said, “I am Kairn, a Gelfling of the Spriton clan. I am honored to be your guest.”

Orritch bellowed in laughter and slapped Kairn on the back. “Rise, Kairn. Tonight, we shall have a banquet in your honor, but for now, clean yourself up! If I didn’t know better, I would think you were rolling around in the mud under a pomintinas monsoon!”

Chapter Two

Kairn had never attended a Podling banquet. He was thus unprepared for the cacophony of clanking dishes and the hurricane of heavy aromas. He was equally unprepared for the dancers who spun around the room, bumping into each other and knocking over the steaming cauldrons that were scattered haphazardly around the floor.

He'd heard the music before. A Podling minstrel had once come to Hallis many trines ago and played at a feast. Still, he had never heard so *much* of it. In one corner, two old Podlings played wooden flutes; the jig from the first player's flute twirled around the other's solemn march. Elsewhere, two drummers pounded away while dancers stomped in circles to their rhythms. Atop a table, two young Podlings picked at long, stringed instruments whose dreamy tunes calmed Kairn.

As they crossed the banquet hall, Parra grabbed every Podling's arm, anxious to introduce them to Kairn. The Podlings, who had been so eager to meet Kairn when he arrived in the village that morning, didn't have a moment to spare for him, as they were consumed by the banquet. Kairn tried hard not to mind, and Parra seemed not to notice.

Between introductions, Parra attempted to explain the name and meaning of each new item they passed, but he spoke too fast for Kairn to make out much of anything. Either the flutes the Podlings played or the tassels that hung from their sleeves were called *dalamoys*, and either Parra's cousin or his childhood tutor was named Alay. He also heard that the dinner would have been something that sounded like *razmizz with a nebrina demi-glaze*, but the Nebrie couldn't be milked today. The connection between the two events was never made clear, but Parra apologized deeply and so Kairn forgave excessively, if confusedly.

Parra was handsome for a Podling. He had an earthy skin tone and thick auburn hair that jumped in every direction, the fashion for Podlings at the time. His brown teardrop eyes dominated his face, which was relatively sharp in comparison to those of the doughy Podlings. Standing at attention in the road in his dirty Podling farmer clothes, he had looked ridiculous to Kairn, but Kairn felt now that he had underestimated Parra. He was different from other Podlings; he had a hunger that a banquet couldn't satisfy.

Parra and Kairn eventually reached the head table, which was raised high above the floor and nestled close to the dark clay wall. Parra explained that the head table, which he called a mizzenmens, was a great honor for guests and a Podling tradition that he believed dated back to before they had even learned the song to harvest turblaroots. Orritch and his wife were seated already—they were the only members of the banquet who were. Instead of sitting to eat, the other Podlings dipped wooden ladles into a giant vat of a boiling soup and gulped a mouthful down with a grin before they returned to the dance floor. Their first several steps were leaps and hops while grabbing their throats. The Podlings always seemed surprised by the soup's temperature, as if they expected it to cool in the few moments between gulps.

Kairn could see that Orritch hated being one of the few Podlings seated at the banquet. His eyes ricocheted around the room, catching each laugh, each fall, each new dish. Kairn insisted that Orritch rise and join the other Podlings, but only Orritch's preeminent manners could compete with his love of drinking, carousing, and dancing. "Absolutely not. What could any Podling enjoy more than to show the famous hospitality of Greggan to a Gelfling warrior like you?"

Orritch's wife sat serenely at the table. In every conversation, her head would turn mechanically to face the speaker, and she would offer her exceedingly composed smile. Kairn could not decide if this habit indicated tranquility or vacuity. In any case, she was the only Podling whom Kairn had ever considered beautiful. She had aged gracefully, and her face's smooth curves glided into each other harmoniously. Her straight red hair, though not as long as a female Gelfling's, touched the top of her back.

Orritch jumped when he noticed Kairn looking at his wife. "My manners! You haven't met my pride and joy yet. You know, Kairn, the

little Podlings in the village always come up to me and say, ‘Lord Orritch’—they call me Lord, you see—‘tell us a war story! Tell us about the expeditions to the north.’ Then I have to correct them and tell them that the fighting in the north was greatly exaggerated and the real fighting was done in the east. You don’t hear enough about the expedition to the east, I say—I don’t need to tell you that, of course! But in any case, then they clamor for a story about the fighting done in the east, and I have to tell them, ‘Boys, the greatest fight of my life was not in the east. No, the greatest fight in my life was getting this one to fall in love with me.’”

He squeezed his wife, whose smile grew slightly more warm. “This beauty is Falavam, which means ‘thank you’ in our language, but I always say that I should be the one thanking her.”

Kairn bowed. “I am honored, Falavam.” She bowed in return but remained silent.

At that moment, a parade of Podling servers waddled in from the kitchen. Some carried red or blue pots on their heads; others were hidden behind tall stacks of dishes. One strong Podling held an enormous jar of wine in each hand. The tabletop, which had been bare except for a few cups, was suddenly transformed into a feast fit for the Castle of the Crystal. Dishes and bowls, chalices and cups, knives and spoons, were all placed before the four diners of the mizzenmens. One by one, the jolly servers lifted the lids of the pots and steam flooded out. Kairn had never tried Podling food before, but from a mix of curiosity and good breeding, he accepted everything. Soon his bowls were filled with shimmering soups, his chalice with wine, his plates with turblaroots and vegetables, and his cups with ale and a pale milk.

Orritch struggled to eat as slowly as he could. It wasn’t natural for him, but he wanted to appear dignified before his distinguished Gelfling guest. “Kairn, tell me about your journey. Where have you been? Where are you going?”

Kairn straightened in his chair and assumed his soldierly bearing. “I have been on a trine’s journey, traveling all of Thra.”

Parra almost dropped his soup, which he had been guzzling directly from the bowl. “All of Thra! Where have you been?”

“I visited most of the Gelfling clans. It was the last step in my education as a warrior. I had to learn all of Thra, so I could protect Her. I

have slept in the wilderness, spent nights in the desert, and tamed a wild Landstrider.” Kairn paused to enjoy their amazement. “Would you like to hear the story of this scar?” He rolled up his sleeve and pointed to a long scar up his arm. Parra, who had hardly ever left Greggan, was struck dumb and nodded at the visitor. “I was sailing with a band of Sifa Gelfling on the Silver Sea. They were fishermen, but that day, we were out to catch some Thrakars.”

“Thrakars? The sea monsters? Those are real?” Parra asked.

“They’re real, and they’re ferocious!” Kairn answered. Parra shuddered. “They have long, narrow mouths with hidden teeth that don’t appear until their jaws decide to snap. They have hard scales, harder than a boulder in the Valley of Stones, and their whole body is a cold purple. They dwell deep at the bottom of the sea, but when they’re hungry, they come straight to the surface. Through the water, you can see just their angry, yellow eyes coming closer, and closer, and closer, faster, and faster, and faster.”

Kairn could tell that Parra’s family loved the thrill of vicarious terror. He paused before resuming his story: “A storm came, one of those sudden, terrible storms you’d only find on the Silver Sea. I had climbed to the top of the ship’s mast to free a rope that had been caught, but on my way down, two Thrakars banged hard against the ship, and I flew off the mast. I nearly fell overboard, but I grabbed on to a fishing spear that was hanging over the edge of the ship. I climbed back into the ship and the tip of the spear sliced into my arm on my way up. I spilled a lot of blood in the sea that day, but the Thrakars paid for each drop dearly. It’s okay, Parra, you can touch the scar.”

Orritch left the table to find the other Podling leaders, pulling them by their arms away from their wives and their tankards of ale. They were all reluctant to sit still during such a great banquet, but Orritch pledged on his ancestors’ souls that they would want to hear what Kairn had to say. The table soon became crowded with the tiny Podling noblemen, joyful and gray.

“Tell us another tale from your travels, Kairn,” Orritch pleaded. “Brother Podlings, Kairn just told us about hunting Thrakars with Sifa Gelfling on the Silver Sea.”

“Who are Sifa Gelfling?” one Podling nobleman asked.

Orritch squinted disdainfully at him. “I’m sorry, Kairn. You don’t have to answer that. Many of these Podlings haven’t traveled much.”

“No, it’s fine. The Sifa Gelfling are a tribe that lives near the Silver Sea. Excellent fishermen. They’re hardy and practical, but also magical. They keep them hidden, but it’s said that the Sifa Gelfling always carry magical charms in their pockets.”

The fattest Podling laughed. “I got a magical charm in my pocket, too!” He farted.

All the Podlings, even Falavam, laughed, but Parra’s and Orritch’s nostrils flared, signaling their embarrassment. Kairn looked uncertain but smiled courteously.

“In any case, perhaps I can tell the story of my visit to the Drenchen clan. They are swamp Gelfling. They were the first Gelfling I visited after I left the Castle of the Crystal. I had just—”

“The Castle of the Crystal?” the oldest Podling at the table asked. “You were at the Castle of the Crystal?”

“I spent many trines at the Castle of the Crystal. It was my honor,” Kairn replied, waiting hopefully for the awkwardness that would occur when the others realized his importance. The Podlings began whispering to each other, hastily swinging from one’s ear to another’s. Kairn was used to such a reaction. In Thra there were only so many jobs for a warrior, and service at the Castle of the Crystal was the most prestigious position.

“What did you do at the Castle of the Crystal?” asked the fattest Podling, much less jovial than the last time he had spoken. Kairn wondered if his tone carried a trace of jealousy.

“I am in line to become the Imperial Guardian.”

The Podlings frowned at each other. The oldest asked, “Why would a Gelfling from the Spriton clan be working at the Castle of the Crystal? Are not Gelfling from the Woodland clan the castle guards?”

Kairn fought the urge to roll his eyes. “Yes, Gelfling from the Woodland clan are the castle guards. My family, however, has protected skekSo the Emperor himself as his personal guardian since the Second Great Conjunction. My father brought me to the castle when I had passed four trines. I have spent all but the summers there since. I received my education at the court, both from my father and from the Skeksis. I even learned a few things on swordsmanship from the Woodland clan guards.

Once I had completed my education at the court, I took my trine-long journey across Thra. My father believes that a man truly completes his education once he has traveled. SkekSo agrees. I will see my clan the day after tomorrow, then return to the Castle of the Crystal to assume my post as the Imperial Guardian to skekSo.”

Orritch stared glumly at the table. The fattest Podling clenched his fists. The old Podling slowly shook his head and drummed his wrinkled fingers. Even Parra would not make eye contact with Kairn.

Finally Kairn realized that they were not envious but rather troubled. He watched the Podlings sigh to themselves and murmur to each other, casting angry looks at him. He wondered what he had said to upset them so deeply. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “In my clan, we value loyalty to the Castle of the Crystal; we value those who protect the Skeksis.”

“I’m sorry, Kairn. It’s not your fault—you don’t know,” Parra said. Though he had addressed Kairn, he had looked only at the other Podlings.

“What do you mean, I don’t know? What don’t I know? I have lived most of my life in the Castle of the Crystal—there is nothing I don’t know about the castle, or the Skeksis.”

The oldest Podling examined Kairn intently. His solemn, gentle grace unwound Kairn’s bravado, the conceit he had developed at the castle where he ordered around the Woodland guards and enjoyed the Emperor’s special favor. He tried hard to conceal his unease.

The elderly Podling finally spoke: “How great is your loyalty to the Emperor and the Skeksis?”

“I swore on my honor, on my life, and on the sacred names of my ancestors. I have no intention to break such an oath,” Kairn replied quickly.

The old nobleman nodded slowly. “What do you know of the Emperor and the Skeksis?”

Defensive and suspicious, Kairn replied, “I know that they have served the Gelfling and the Podlings well. I know that it was the Skeksis who taught the Sifa clan to narrow their prows and expand their sails. I know that it was the Skeksis who taught the Dousan clan to find water in the desert of the Crystal Sea. I know that it was the Skeksis who taught the Podlings to milk the Nebrie. I know that the Skeksis have been great patrons to both of our villages—extravagant and eccentric, perhaps, but

always generous. And I know that the Emperor has treated my family well, bestowing upon us titles and wealth and the honor due to great warriors. Above all, I know they protect Thra by guarding the Crystal.”

Parra winced. Kairn instantly realized that he had lost his temper and had been shouting at his Podling hosts. He lowered his head before the old Podling. “Forgive me, sir. Tell me your name, so that I may apologize properly.”

The old Podling touched Kairn’s head with the tips of his tiny, gnarled fingers. “I am Donam. Please, there is no need to bow. We are all sons and daughters of Thra.”

Kairn shook his head but could not look up from the floor. “No, Donam. I beg your forgiveness. I have spoken harshly in your village, in a banquet you arranged for me in your great hospitality. Orritch, I beg your forgiveness as well. To act as I have, especially in front of your wife and son, does not befit a Gelfling of the Spriton clan, much less the successor to the Imperial Guardian or a descendant of my great-grandfather Kastor.”

“Rise, Kairn. You are forgiven,” Donam said. Orritch repeated the same.

Kairn rose slowly. “Now, why do you question my loyalty to the Skeksis?” he asked.

“Because they’re lizard villains, that’s why! They aren’t to be trusted! They’re murderers!” the fat Podling shouted. Orritch nodded unintentionally.

Kairn swallowed deep breaths but couldn’t exhale. He ground his teeth and clenched his lips.

Donam touched his hand to the chest of the fat Podling, who reluctantly slid back against his chair. “There have been very troubling reports about the Skeksis, Kairn, reports that they have done terrible things to Podlings—and to Gelfling.”

“What things?” Kairn said.

Orritch replied hesitantly, “They are almost unspeakable.”

Attempting to moderate his anger, Kairn said, “But you must speak them if I am to understand why the Skeksis—whom I have sworn to serve—have been slandered so harshly.”

“Very well,” Orritch said. “Over this past trine, Podlings have slowly been disappearing: mother’s sons, husband’s wives, children’s siblings.

They were farmers working in the fields, merchants traveling to other villages, children playing in the evenings. We lived in fear—we still do. We couldn't imagine who or what could have taken them. Podlings may not be at the top of the food chain, Kairn, but we also don't have any natural predators. Thra gives to us freely, and we give freely to all who are in need. We are a gentle race. Who would want to harm us?"

Kairn felt uncomfortable. Donam's steady scrutiny unnerved Kairn, and Orritch's grave tone didn't seem to fit him. Kairn was confused; no one in the castle had ever mentioned the disappearance of any Podlings.

Orritch continued, "Then reports began to arrive. They were vague rumors at first, but recently a Gelfling—from Hallis, in fact—came to warn us. He told us that a Woodland Gelfling, a palace guard, had learned a terrible secret. He fled the Castle of the Crystal to warn the other Gelfling clans and all the gentle creatures of Thra."

No one spoke. The party still whirled around them; none of the revelers noticed the somber table of noblemen, where the Gelfling warrior sat paralyzed. At last, Kairn worked up the strength to ask: "What was the terrible secret?"

Orritch appealed to the other Podlings with his eyes, either for strength or permission—perhaps for both. "There is a Skeksis . . ." He trailed off, then tried again: "It is said that there is a Skeksis who has manipulated the Crystal for dark experiments, and that there is another Skeksis—they call him the Hunter, but no one has ever seen him—who has been snatching Podlings and Gelfling for these experiments."

Orritch seemed exhausted from speaking just a few sentences. His stressed expression curled his long, patchy eyebrow hairs together into tangled clumps.

Kairn could not believe these allegations, but he knew precisely which Skeksis were the subjects of these rumors. SkekTek the Scientist was a great scholar. He charted the three suns and studied the Crystal, attempting to confine its power and mystery in formulas written on skekOk's scrolls. And skekMal the Hunter was the most vicious Skeksis. He had taken Kairn hunting once, but his ferocious demeanor on the hunt shocked Kairn. Although at court he was an urbane sportsman who delighted in recounting his exotic expeditions, on the hunt he was almost feral. While hunting, he rarely spoke, he breathed hungrily, he bared his

teeth, his leathery green skin shined, and his black eyes were too alive. Kairn found any excuse to avoid those hunting trips.

“I’m sorry. That’s simply impossible. There must be some confusion,” Kairn said.

Falavam held Orritch’s hand. He looked too exhausted and perturbed to speak another word.

Parra spoke up in his place. “No one knows what the experiments are, but afterward, the Podlings and Gelfling are not the same. They are alive but not.”

Kairn squinted and at last exhaled. “Impossible,” he repeated. “It’s all impossible. I have spent my entire life at the Castle of the Crystal, and I can assure you that it is not possible.”

“Have you ever been inside skekTek’s laboratory?” Donam asked.

“No. It is forbidden for any Gelfling to enter the laboratory, but how could that all happen without my knowing? No, it is not possible. The Skeksis are not capable of such malice.”

Unable to contain his anger any longer, the fat Podling demanded, “If the Hunter isn’t taking these Podlings and Gelfling, who is?”

“I don’t know, but I vow this: I will not assume my position as the Imperial Guardian until I have discovered the answer. This scourge is not the Skeksis. I will find out whoever is doing this, and I will slay them with the sword made for me by the Skeksis. On that I pledge my family’s honor.”

Kairn stood and thanked everyone at the mizzenmens. All courteously thanked him in return, except for the fat Podling, who begrudgingly thanked him as well after substantial prodding from Donam. Kairn then turned and walked cheerlessly across the banquet, dodging the cauldrons scattered haphazardly and the hopping Podling dancers and the pounding Podling drummers. Like most of the revelers, Kairn had forgotten that the banquet was thrown in his honor, and he felt quite alien.

Once outside, he slumped into the shadows. Thra was often peaceful but never still. It was mating season for the Fizzgigs. Kairn watched the two flashes of brown fur dart after each other in the tall lasciva grass. The playful lasciva couldn’t resist interfering in their courtship games—concealing one Fizzgig with a blanket of grass only to uncover him as his new love passed. And the giant ansula bugs flew in slow loops, arcing

gracefully to the treetops and swooping down to the ground, again and again in a dizzy, perpetual masterpiece. Kairn used to try to catch them on summer evenings in Hallis—never while he was at the Castle of the Crystal, of course. His father, Kiff, would not tolerate that sort of behavior there.

Parra appeared in the doorway. He slid up to Kairn, who smiled at him, though it took effort. “Kairn, have you ever swallowed an ansula?” Parra asked.

Kairn laughed. “No. I’ve never even caught one! I used to spend hours trying. It seems so easy. They seem so slow and predictable, but things are never as easy as they look. Do you have a song to call ansulas, too?”

“No, I think I’m just better at it.” Parra winked. It was funny to see a Podling wink—to squish the cheeks of his already-squishy face. Then he lay down in the lasciva and hummed. The lasciva fell down across him, cloaking him entirely. An ansula glided low to the ground, and Parra burst out of the grass. The ansula instantly vanished.

With his hands cupped delicately, Parra walked over to Kairn. “Open your mouth,” he said.

Kairn obliged reluctantly. Parra put his hands up to Kairn’s mouth and released a still-buzzing ansula.

Kairn’s eyes opened wide. “Do I chew? Do I chew?” he tried to say with his mouth closed and the ansula bouncing off the insides of his cheeks. Parra rolled on the ground, holding his belly and trying to shout, “Chew! Chew!” between his laughs. Kairn swallowed the bug whole. He burped and felt one of the dainty ansula wings flutter onto his tongue. Parra sat up in the lasciva across from Kairn. Once their laughter subsided, they didn’t speak for some time. Finally, Kairn said, “They hate me.”

Parra shook his head. “No one hates you. They are very upset. These disappearances have been terrifying Podling villages across Thra for two trines. Now even Gelfling are disappearing. We want truth. We want safety. We want peace. Thra was meant for peace. The Skeksis threaten all that. To hear someone defend them wounds us.”

Parra’s attempt to reassure Kairn only upset him more. “I wounded you.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I have. I do not blame them for being wrong, but they *are* wrong, Parra. The Skeksis would not do such a thing. I will prove it.”

“Maybe, Kairn. Maybe,” Parra whispered.

They walked silently home.

Chapter Three

Kairn had a private ritual. Whenever he departed a village, he would don his armor in seclusion and polish away all the smudges. He would confirm once more that he was alone, and then he would unsheathe his sword and artfully swing his blade, practicing with precision each maneuver taught to him by Kiff and skekVar the General.

Normally this ritual gave him all the confidence expected of a young, strong, accomplished Gelfling warrior. He would not walk that day; he would march. He assumed that each passing traveler eyed him with envy. But the morning Kairn left Greggans, he did not feel so composed. He was troubled by what Parra and the other Podlings had said. He told himself that the Skeksis could never have committed the atrocities of which they were accused. He knew them too well. He respected them too much.

Still, regardless of the Skeksis's innocence, he could feel neither pride nor confidence when he knew how much pain he had caused the Podlings at the banquet. It was the first time in his life that he had been hated. Their manners wouldn't allow them to speak it, and almost entirely prevented them from showing it, but Kairn's inexperience in being hated did not prevent him from perceiving it.

The Podling fields continued for miles. The bright fruits and calm shades undermined the Podlings' claims of calamity. How could they be facing such a dreadful crisis during such a perfect harvest? How could such evil torment a race whose mere chants Thra obeyed? It comforted him to know that he would be home the next day. While the other members of the Spriton clan lacked the close relationship with the Skeksis that Kairn's family had, they respected his family's service to the castle. Kairn recalled returning to Hallis each summer: Gelfling bounded out of their homes and servants blew the horns. Women stared longingly at his father,

a widower since Kairn's birth. Kiff feigned modesty, but even as a child, Kairn knew that his father lived for the attention.

Still, even the anticipation of this homecoming did not feel right. On the one hand, Kairn craved the warmth of his own community. He felt confused, alone, dismissed. On the other hand, the Podlings' disappointment had filled him with self-hatred. He couldn't imagine receiving adulation, no matter how impressive he looked in his handsome armor.

By afternoon he had passed the fertile Podling fields and entered the barren land between Greggan and Hallis. High red rocks rose on both sides. The Spriton clan lived in caves, but the caves in this abandoned territory seemed sinister. Perhaps the stories about the dangers in these borderlands were only legends, or so Kairn hoped. Perhaps they were just the tales Woodland guards told on the castle walls to stay awake on long, late-night watches. Still, he passed the entrance to each cave with his sword drawn, peering into the black and reminding himself again and again that no one he knew had ever been attacked in the caves.

That knowledge comforted him little. Although the Podlings' accusations against the Skeksis had to be rubbish, Kairn did not doubt that Podlings and Gelfling had in fact been disappearing. Whatever terrible creature was abducting innocents would likely hide out in these caves. The tall shadows left the area cold; an outlaw could conceal himself for many trines in the maze of midnight tunnels connecting the caverns.

To one side of him, Kairn heard a heaving breath and a quickly swallowed yelp. He paused and leaned toward the noises. They did not appear to come from a cave, but rather a large hole. He stared into the hole, but saw nothing and heard nothing. Perhaps he had imagined it in his fear. He started to walk away, but he was embarrassed. He doubted his entire education as a warrior. The only true combat he had ever seen was with the Sifa clan against the Thrakars, but they were a pathetic bunch. They were almost emaciated. They had become dangerous to Gelfling only out of hungry desperation. Kairn had felt sorrowful hunting them; he felt more like a herdsman putting down sickly Landstriders than a warrior saving a village from murderous monsters.

"I will find out whoever is doing this, and I will slay them with the sword made for me by the Skeksis. On that I pledge my family's honor."

He recalled those words. He had taken an oath to the Podlings to find whatever was terrorizing them. He shouldn't hear breaths and yelps in this dead borderland. He had to discover their source.

He slid into the hole before his legs would have the chance to fail him. He could see nothing, and he had no torch. Kairn drew his sword and spun it around him. He was in a tunnel; he felt the narrow walls on each side of him. Keeping his sword in front of him, he gently pressed his fingers against one of the cave's walls to guide himself and moved forward noiselessly. After several minutes of slow, tense steps, the wall stopped. Kairn put his hand out and felt stone on three sides. He was at the tunnel's end.

A footstep echoed. Kairn checked his own feet, as if they might have moved without notifying him, as if he could even see them. He looked around but there was only darkness everywhere. The sound's source was unclear. He turned back toward the hole through which he had entered. A small beam of light beckoned from the hole. Kairn thrust out his sword and advanced slowly. His fear had calmed him and he felt outside himself, outside the danger.

Another footstep.

Kairn was certain it had come from the left. He turned and charged forward hastily, but there was no tunnel. He bounced hard off the wall and fell, his sword clanging against the ground. He scrambled on all fours to recover it in the darkness. His hands found the blade and he anxiously grasped it. The sharp edges tore into his palms. He dropped the sword and felt the blood racing down his wrists.

"Who goes there?" a voice shouted. Kairn was too dizzy to know from where.

He picked up his sword—this time by the grip. "The warrior Kairn of Hallis, son of Kiff, subject of Queen Silva, servant of skekSo, successor to the Imperial Guardian. Show your face if you dare stand opposite me."

The sound of a gasping rush of air answered him. Suddenly the tunnel was full of blinding light. Kairn squeezed his eyes shut; he felt like a Grottan Gelfling at the rise of the first sun. He covered his eyes and slashed his sword through the cold tunnel air.

"Put out that light!" Kairn screamed. No one obeyed.

Overriding every instinct, he wrenched his arm away from his eyes and readied himself to attack whoever was in front of him. As he searched the tunnel through his squinting eyes, however, he realized violence was quite unnecessary.

“Father!” Kairn cried.

At the opposite end of the tunnel, a weathered Gelfling stood, holding a torch whose light gradually became tolerable to Kairn. Kiff wore the same robe as Kairn, but his was soiled and hung loosely from his bony shoulders. He also wore nearly the same armor as Kairn, but his was dull and speckled with scrapes and scratches, nicks and dents. Kairn sheathed his sword and ran toward him.

“Welcome to my palace, Kairn!” he said with a laugh that crackled like the rusty grind of wagon wheels on the first day of spring. He opened his arms wide to receive his son. Their armor clacked together as they embraced. Kairn pressed his cheek against the cool black stone of his father’s breastplate. He hadn’t seen him in nearly a trine, and he was quite relieved to find his father rather than whatever he feared had been prowling in that tunnel.

Kiff patted him on the back and whispered, “Good to see you, my boy. Welcome, welcome, welcome.”

He sounded gentler than usual, Kairn thought.

Kiff led his son into a small room hidden cleverly off the tunnel. On the far side a simple blanket covered the rocky ground, and on the near side a tin pan leaned against a fire pit. The room was cold and smelled of charcoal. Kiff wedged the torch into a small gap in the wall and bent down to grab small cloths, which he used to tenderly wipe away the small stream of blood running from Kairn’s hands. Once he had finished dressing the wounds, Kiff said, “Please, sit.”

Kairn hesitated to sit on the dirty blanket in his fine robe and armor, but he would never disrespect his father.

“Strange home for the Imperial Guardian, no?” Kiff asked with a wry smile. “But I’m an old soldier, used to this hard living.”

Kairn started to speak several times but couldn’t. “I’m sorry. I just don’t understand,” he finally stuttered.

Kiff leaned across him and filled two chipped clay cups with water from a dusty jug. Kairn ignored the specks of dirt swimming in the water.

“These tunnels are awfully dangerous places to take an evening stroll. Were you scared?” Kiff asked.

“Of course not. I’ve been trained. I’ve spent the last trine traveling as a warrior,” Kairn said. At times he thought of Kiff more as his commander than his father.

Kiff smiled and shook his head. “You can be scared. Why, I’ve been scared for you this past trine, and I have more faith in you than you do in yourself.”

“Thank you. I’ve missed you, Father.”

“And I’ve missed you. I’ve been worried about you. Seeing you safe, I feel like I’m back at the castle.” Kiff stared at Kairn with a heavy expression and sorrowful eyes. Then with a soft sigh, he said, “Son, they say that besides the Mystics and Aughra herself, no creature on Thra is more prudent, more reasonable, more level-headed than a Gelfling. That is what they say of Gelfling.”

“But what have you found?” Kairn said, knowing that his father wanted him to ask just that.

“Fickle slaves to rumor and emotion.”

They both sipped from their cups and stared at the torch’s roaring flame. Kairn was glad to see his father but felt uncomfortable; Kiff was not himself. “When are you returning to the castle?” he asked—certain that his father was not returning to the castle.

“The journey isn’t safe—you haven’t been to the village, obviously. Have you faced any trouble in your travels?”

“There were strange accusations from some drunk Podlings last night in Greggan.”

“It’s not Podlings you have to worry about,” Kiff hissed. The proud warrior’s spirit flared out from the shrinking Gelfling in dull, scratched armor. “You have to worry about the Woodland clan and about our own village. If the reports are true, you must even worry about Queen Silva. We are no longer the pride of the Gelfling, Kairn. We are outcasts.”

“Father, I don’t understand.”

“And I don’t know how I could explain to you. We must dreamfast.”

“Are you sure?” Kairn asked. His father, once the greatest Gelfling warrior of his generation, now slunk around bare caverns beneath

anonymous lands. Kairn worried that learning whatever drove his father to this point would devastate him, too.

Kiff nodded and softly took his wrist. Their forefingers touched. Kairn shook. He hadn't dreamfasted in at least a trine: the Skeksis did not have the ability, and he never knew any of the other Gelfling he had met well enough. In any case, regardless of how many times a Gelfling dreamfasted, each time still surprised him. Kairn's chest pounded. He shut his eyes so tightly that he thought his eyelids would slip over each other. A current ran through him, somehow both coming and going at the same time. He was no longer just in the cavern. And he was no longer just himself. It had begun.

Chapter Four

They were—rather, Kiff was—in Hallis. The Gelfling there lived in a ring of caves around a grassy common. Kairn instantly felt nostalgic when he saw Hallis through his father's eyes, but Kiff's fear and resentment quashed Kairn's nostalgia. It seemed that every Gelfling of Hallis was in the common. Kairn scanned the crowd for Soli, his beloved and the daughter of Hallis's matriarch, Saffa. Kiff, however, was not searching for Soli, and so Kairn yielded to his father's vision.

The crowd formed a tight circle around a Gelfling whom Kairn did not know, but his dark-green blouse and well-worn leather pants indicated that he was from the Woodland clan. The Woodland Gelfling fancied themselves great warriors, though none of them could best a member of Kairn's line in a fair fight. Kairn did not recognize him as one of the castle guards, even though he was of the proper age. The crowd swayed as the Gelfling of Hallis jostled each other to see this Woodland visitor.

Soven, Saffa's husband and Kiff's sometime rival, was speaking to the Woodlander. "You have made enough of a commotion in this village with your rumors. Now, from the beginning, tell us your tale. Be concise. Don't prattle on like a Podling or speak in riddles like they say the Mystics do."

"Thank you, Soven. I am Radix, a Gelfling of the Woodland clan, from the village of Ashton."

"There's your problem there!" Kiff shouted. The other warriors broke out in laughter. The Gelfling boys didn't understand, so they made a point to laugh the loudest. Kiff had a quiet respect for the Woodland Gelfling who served at the Castle of the Crystal, but they were the exception. He saw all other Woodland Gelfling as cowardly braggarts, and he often made his feelings on the subject known.

Radix smiled at Kiff with excessive courtesy. “As I said, I am Radix, a proud Gelfling of the Woodland clan, and I come here today to speak for the salvation of Gelfling as a species.”

Kiff snickered and smirked at the other warriors. They winked back at him. Their strong arms were crossed.

“I speak not only for the salvation of the Gelfling, but about the fate of Podlings, of the Landstriders, maybe even the fate of all of Thra,” said Radix. “As you all know, several Podlings and Gelfling have disappeared over the past few weeks with no explanation. We Gelfling have all lost our way of life, and we live in dread. Mothers, you no longer let your children play in the fields. Fathers, you hurry back to your homes before the third sun sets, and you won’t return to your labor before the first sun rises. The legend of the Hunter is spoken in whispers across all of Thra. Delegations have searched for Aughra with no success. Appeals have been made to the Skeksis with empty replies. Our queen has even considered seeking the assistance of the Mystics.”

Kiff was very tempted to interrupt the stranger, but he strained to preserve his manners.

“Today I tell you that I know why your children cannot play in the fields, why you cannot labor between the third sun’s setting and the first sun’s rising. None of us is safe, and we are not safe because of the Skeksis. They have done this to us. They *are* doing this to us.”

This earnest declaration terrified the crowd. As fear often does in groups, it manifested itself as fury. The community howled at the stranger:

“Who are you?”

“How should you know?”

“You can’t sell that nonsense to Spriton Gelfling! Take a dip in the swamp and see if you can hoodwink some Drenchen Gelfling!”

“You Woodland Gelfling can live your lives in fear! Anyone who starts trouble in our village might as well have spit in the face of Arax himself!”

Kairn could feel his father’s conflicting emotions. This was treason, but Radix had a sincerity that could not be dismissed. He might have been misinformed; he might have lost his mind; he might even have enjoyed one too many of the tall flowers that Podlings eat after the harvest; but Kiff had to admit that Radix believed everything he said. Kiff raised his

sword, which was far larger than any other Gelfling in the village could have wielded, and quickly hushed the crowd.

“Two weeks ago,” Radix said, “Rian, a Woodland Gelfling and a guard at the Castle of the Crystal for more than ten trines, returned to Ashton. Normally an unmovable warrior of the highest dignity, he was not himself.”

Kiff scoffed audibly. Through the dreamfast, Kairn could hear his father’s thoughts: Kiff respected Rian well enough, but hearing him praised so highly, Kiff could think only of how he had upbraided Rian on so many chilly late-night shifts for sneaking off to the pantry when he was supposed to be patrolling the castle’s walls.

“Rian’s face was scratched with briars,” Radix said. “He had shed his armor in his frantic rush. His shoes were torn, and his eyes were wild. He flew into the home of our matriarch, Elmi, who immediately called together the village’s eldest and wisest Gelfling.”

“Wisest Woodland Gelfling? You mean all the ones who can write their names?” an anonymous Gelfling joked. Many laughed, but Soven’s glare quickly shamed them into silence.

Radix continued, “The next day, the village gathered to hear Rian speak. I will spare you the horror of his entire tale. In short, one night, while Rian was fulfilling his honorable duty of guarding the Castle and the Skeksis—who have been great patrons to the Woodland clan—he found himself in the laboratory of skekTek, a place Gelfling seldom visited.”

Kiff sneered at this remark. Rian was snooping in a forbidden area—Kiff never would have violated the Skeksis’s trust in such a way.

“Rian heard terrible shrieks, and he peered across the laboratory. He saw the frizzy chestnut hair of Podlings rising slightly above the tops of three chairs. Crude straps squeezed the chairs, binding the Podlings in place. Tubes ran from their arms into small vials. SkekTek first appeared deaf to the Podlings’ hysterical pleas for mercy and then eventually seemed to delight in them. The far end of the laboratory was open to the Crystal Chamber, where the Crystal was suspended over the Lake of Fire. SkekTek tugged and fought with buttons, levers, chains, and gears that covered an entire wall. Rian puzzled over what they all might do until he saw the Crystal itself shift. As it moved, the Crystal shot out three blinding, precise, pink beams at the Podlings.

“Rian crept across the room. The beams burned into the Podlings, who thrashed and writhed with the pathetic vigor of a dying murina. A purple liquid steadily dripped from the tubes into the vials. At last, skekTek pulled up the levers and the Crystal’s beams relented. The Podlings sat motionless. They were dead, Rian thought, but then skekTek released their restraints and they rose. Their eyes were hollow. Their faces were pale. They wheezed when they tried to breathe. Each looked directly at Rian, yet none saw him. Instead they marched robotically through a small gate that skekTek had opened. SkekTek then gathered the vials and put them on a rack with dozens of others, all of different colors.”

The crowd was still. Radix was trembling and appeared close to tears. Kairn felt his father’s fear. There was no concealing in dreamfasting.

Kiff broke the silence. “How do we know that this Rian is not a liar?”

“Our matriarch, Elmi, dreamfasted with Rian and confirmed himself that this is true.”

“It’s convenient that Rian uncovered this just as the Woodland Gelfling are being expelled from the Castle of the Crystal. You’ve lost the Skeksis’s favor, so now you want to bring the rest of us Gelfling down with you!”

“The Woodland Gelfling were expelled because Rian discovered this truth.”

Kiff swung around to his fellow Spriton Gelfling, turning his back to Radix. His voice wavered: “This stranger has come into our village to make trouble for us. We know the Skeksis well, and no one knows the Skeksis better than me. They would never commit such violence.”

In this dreamfast, Kairn worried that he doubted his father’s honesty and that Kiff would notice. However, that is one of the common mistakes of dreamfasting: it is difficult to divine the origins of emotions. Kairn realized that the doubt actually belonged to his father.

“The Skeksis have always been good to us, and—”

“Good to you, maybe!” came a cry from the crowd. It was Babul, the rascal nephew of Bibul, known in Hallis for his love of wine, particularly in large quantities. No one in Hallis had ever spoken like that to Kiff, not even Soven himself.

Kiff continued, “We should throw a stranger like this out of town before he causes us any more trouble, and furthermore—”

“Have you a better explanation for why children from our village have been disappearing then, Kiff?” Dallys the widow asked.

Kiff paused. “I don’t, but I will find out. We cannot rush to believe every rumor from every Woodland Gelfling.”

“Every rumor?” Argens, the village’s wealthiest Gelfling, asked. “A guard of the castle saw it personally and then dreamfasted with the Woodland matriarch!”

“Again, I don’t trust these Woodland Gelfling more than a calm day on the Silver Sea, and I don’t see why you should either,” Kiff said. Kairn could feel that his father was trying to convince himself through his emphatic certainty.

“How can we trust you when it comes to the Skeksis? You spend more time at the Castle of the Crystal than you do in Hallis,” Dallys said.

“Perhaps you should retire for a bit, Kiff,” Soven said.

“No one tells me when to go. I am the Imperial Guardian!”

“And maybe your loyalty lies more with your job than with your clan. Here in Hallis, we are Gelfling first, not servants of the Skeksis. We care about protecting the lives of our fellow Gelfling, not the reputations of the Skeksis,” Argens said.

Kiff grabbed the handle of his sword without unsheathing it. “Who do you think you are, you pudgy coward?”

Soven walked toward Kiff. “Kiff, it’s time to go.”

Kiff was careful not to show aggression to Soven, but he had no intention of moving. He leaned close to Argens, who feigned confidence. “I’m not going anywhere!” Kiff shouted. His armor rattled as he shook in his hazy anger.

A Gelfling named Meht stepped forward. He kept his hand on the pommel of his sword without drawing it. Besides Kiff, he was Hallis’s best warrior, better even than Soven. “You’re leaving if I have anything to say about it. This village only needs Gelfling who look out for Gelfling. If you want to defend the Skeksis, I suggest you do so at the castle,” Meht said.

His brother Marn stepped forward, his hand balled tightly around his sword’s grip. “I stand with Meht. Kiff, you must leave the village if you will not oppose the Skeksis. Your loyalty lies either with them or with your own people.”

Meht and Marn faced Kiff defiantly. Argens, who had been half-hiding behind Marn, now stepped forward and said, “I agree with these men. You are a Gelfling or you are a mercenary.”

“Mercenary?” Kiff said. “Do not use the terms of war when you know nothing of it.”

“Kiff, you can’t fight a whole village. For the love of Arax, please, come with me to discuss this,” Soven said.

“I have nothing to discuss. I will not take up arms against any of you, but as you lack the wisdom to hear me, I will go.” Kiff instantly regretted his decision, but knew he had little choice. He took his hand off his sword and steeled his expression. The crowd parted for him. His leather boots were silent on the grass as he strode between the villagers.

There ended the dreamfast.

Kairn and his father could not break eye contact and did not speak until Kairn was overcome by his anger. “How dare they? You are the pride of Hallis. I will return to the village and strike down each one, beginning with Soven—even if it means forsaking my love for Soli.”

Kiff shook his head. “No, that won’t do. You cannot bear arms against another Gelfling from our clan. Even striking down a Woodland Gelfling requires the greatest deliberation.”

“But they shamed our line and dishonored the castle. I have no need to deliberate. But first, I must escort you back to the castle—you cannot waste away in this cavern.”

“No, I can’t go back. The Skeksis expelled the Woodland Gelfling—I’d be the only Gelfling there.”

“Yes, but unless the stories are—” Kairn stopped himself. With all his father had suffered for loyalty to the Skeksis and the castle, he could not raise the possibility that Rian had spoken honestly.

“I will not fight against the Skeksis, but they cannot ask me to be the one Gelfling fighting against my entire race,” Kiff said. Kairn noticed that his father spoke slower than he used to.

“So, the Gelfling have decided on war against the Skeksis?” Kairn asked.

“No, not yet. A minstrel passed through this wasteland yesterday. He had just visited Hallis, and though he was too polite to ask my tale, he told

me the situation. Queen Silva summoned representatives from our village, maybe from other villages, too. It's all rumors, but something is afoot."

Kairn stood up and looked down at his father, whose armor hung loose around his thinning frame. "Very well. I will go to Hallis, and I will make our will known to Elmi and Soven."

Kiff stood up, and Kairn saw that malnutrition and exile could not strip him of his warrior's bearing. "Kairn, you cannot go. It is not safe. They may not have decided their precise course, but they are set against the Skeksis and the castle. You will fare no better than I. Stay here with me or seek safety with a friendly village, but do not sacrifice yourself for a lost cause."

"Father, I must go. I must try to preserve peace."

Greg Coles

Rebels of the Dark Crystal

Chapter One

The Unexpected Dreamfast

I still remember the look in his eyes that night; the stunned, hollow look of a Gelfling who had seen something too horrible for words.

He rocked slowly back and forth, shivering despite the heat from the furnace, gazing into the dancing flames. I draped a thick blanket around his shoulders, but he barely seemed to notice. He hadn't said a word since coming in—not even a greeting. He just reached for my shoulder and collapsed onto me. I staggered under his weight and guided him to a three-legged chair. We sat in silence together and listened to the wind that howled through the trees of Shadowwood and shook the walls of my little blacksmith shop.

“Rian,” I said gently. “Rian, what happened?”

He answered with heavy, ragged breaths. I studied him as he studied the fire, watched the yellow and orange flicker in the pupils of his bright blue eyes.

Rian was everything a Gelfling lad was supposed to be. Like me, he grew up on the plains of Skarith, not half a league from the Castle of the Crystal. The Harath clan was proud to call him one of their own; powerfully built and adventurous, he had been hired as a guard by the Skeksis as soon as he was old enough to shoot a bow. Gelfling girls swooned over his strong jaw and deep voice and firm muscles. In their eyes, he was the embodiment of perfection.

But Rian had never cared about perfection. The clearest proof of that was his choice of a best friend: me. I was his opposite, as imperfect as he was perfect. When I was an infant, a Landstrider crushed my right leg,

crippling me before I learned to walk. Unable to farm and unable to fight, I was an embarrassment to my parents. As soon as I was old enough they apprenticed me to Kratos, the blacksmith, to learn a trade that even a second-rate, one-legged Gelfling could manage.

Working for Kratos was a kind of banishment from the rest of the Harath clan. The blacksmith shop, because of its noise and heat, was built along the boundary of Shadowwood, far from the Gelfling dwellings on the plains. Aside from the occasional customer, my only company was old Kratos, who didn't talk much and listened even less. When he died suddenly of the coughing sickness, I was left to run the smithy alone.

But even though I lived and worked alone, Rian refused to let me be lonely. From the time we were young, he insisted on dragging me along on his grand adventures: him charging through the forbidden Shadowwood with a stick or a pair of forge tongs as a weapon, me hobbling gamely behind on my crutches. I was always slowing him down, but he never seemed to mind. He knew how to make even a cripple feel like a hero.

As we got older and the pressures of blacksmithing became greater, I learned to live my adventures through Rian. I would make tools and weapons for him free of charge. He would go out and use them to hunt and fight off predators in the forest, then return to the smithy in the evenings and tell stories of his exploits. He was dangerous with almost any weapon, but his weapon of choice was a broadsword that I forged for him on my own anvil.

Rian was known throughout the clan as a brave and experienced warrior; one of their finest. But those who knew him only as a warrior didn't know the same Gelfling that I did. The Rian I knew was peace-loving and jovial, with a quick wit and a smile that could light up his whole triangular face.

On that night, though, he wasn't smiling. That night, the only light on his face was the reflection of the blazing furnace. I threw two more logs into the flames when I saw him shivering—the fire burned so hot that streams of sweat ran down both our faces, and still he shivered.

"Rian," I said again. "Are you ill? Should I fetch a healer?"

He shook his head. "I'm just cold," he said quietly. "Cold, and tired."

"But it's burning up in here," I protested. I pressed my fingers to his forehead to check his temperature.

As soon as my skin met Rian's, a tug like a lightning bolt jerked through my arm and I felt myself falling. My body stayed completely still, but Rian's memories pulled on my mind, drawing me in like a whirlpool. We were dreamfasting, the Gelfling way of sharing memories by touch. The blacksmith's shop faded away as I let Rian's world consume me.

I was in a cold stone hallway lined with smoky lanterns. My hands held the short spear of a castle guard, and I paced the hallway easily, without crutches. Both my legs were whole and healthy. Rian's body was my body, and I felt myself reliving his actions as his voice echoed in my ears.

Today the Skeksis held council, and I was assigned to stand guard in the secluded wing of the castle that holds skekTek's laboratory. Midway through my shift, I was standing across from the laboratory door when a thin beam of blue light burst through the keyhole, shining so brightly in my face I couldn't ignore it. I heard a click like the sound of a key turning, and suddenly the door swung open. Wondering what strange magic was afoot, I followed the beam of light into skekTek's laboratory and saw what no Gelfling has seen before.

Foul-smelling potions boiled in cauldrons and sat in flasks along the walls. In the middle of the room stood a large desk covered in a rich burgundy cloth. The desk held a stack of yellowed parchments, with ink and a quill beside them. On top of the stack was a sketch of a Gelfling like me, standing inside a circle wearing only a loincloth, his arms and legs outstretched. There were numbers written around the circle, complex calculations and measurements of each limb and joint. I realized that this Gelfling had no name, only numbers as his identity. That thought made me sick to my stomach.

Beside the parchments I saw a small crystal vial, stoppered with a leather peg and full of pale blue liquid. Rose sunlight streamed in from an upper window, striking the vial and shining a slender refracted beam into the hallway. This was the source of the light that had caught my attention, the light that seemed to invite me into skekTek's laboratory as if by magic. When I held my breath, I thought I could hear a faint humming coming from the vial, like music without notes.

As I watched, the sunlight crept away from the vial, hiding it in shadow. But the blue light kept glowing with an incandescence of its own.

It drew me in. It was alluring, beautiful, so beautiful it hurt to look, and still I couldn't turn away. I stretched my fingers out and brushed them against the crystal.

That was when I felt it.

Evil.

Death.

Suddenly a scream tore through the dreamfast, filling up my ears, my mouth, every nerve in my body. I couldn't tell if the voice was Rian's or mine. I didn't know if we were screaming in dreamfast or inside the blacksmith's shop. Rian's memory ripped to shreds like cloth. Whatever the source of the horror was, our dreamfast couldn't survive it. I was on the floor of the smithy, panting and tasting dirt. My skin burned from the heat of the furnace, and yet my insides still felt icy. I understood why Rian was shivering.

I got to my feet slowly. The horror clung to my skin like a wet cloak. "What was that?"

Rian answered with a violent shudder.

"You need a healer." I took a coat from the wall and picked up my crutches. "This fire isn't warming you, and I don't know what will. I'm going to find help."

"It's not safe," Rian stammered, his eyes wide. "The Hunter . . ."

"What would the Hunter want with me?" I forced a smile. "I'm as skinny as a burbler fin—he wouldn't have anything to eat."

I was out the door before Rian could see me lose my nerve.

A harsh wind shook the trees. Glowing sarna leaves, plucked off their branches by the storm, lit up the night with faint streaks of green. Goldenbeaks huddled together in their nests, wings wrapped around each other for warmth, whistling harmonies that were swept away by the stormy sky. I tucked my head into the nape of my coat and hurried toward the home of Paryn the herbalist.

The Harath clan had many healers, herbalists, and seers, each with specialties of their own; they often worked together on difficult illnesses. But of all these, Paryn was my favorite. He was a misfit—like me. Tall and pale skinned, he could never have passed as a true Harath. He lived among us, but he was a member of the Vapra clan by birth. Many trine ago, when he lived in the Glade of Gashqa with his clan, his wife, Ani, had been

killed and eaten by the Hunter. After the tragedy, everything about Paryn's homeland reminded him of Ani. Heartbroken, he left the Glade and came to Skarith to start a new life with his young daughter, Alethi.

Paryn seemed to understand me as very few in my own clan could. He was patient and thoughtful, virtues that were highly prized among the Vapra but seen as unnecessary luxuries by the pragmatic Harath clan. Paryn knew what it felt like to be politely ignored by his Harath peers and gawked at by little ones who didn't know any better. Whenever the throbbing in my leg became too much to bear, I went to see him for herbs to ease the pain, because I knew I could trust him.

Also, it didn't hurt that his daughter, Alethi, was the most beautiful Gelfling I had ever laid eyes on.

Although the Vapra avoided fighting whenever possible, their women were trained for battle; wings gave them an advantage over male warriors. Alethi had grown up in Skarith with the Harath clan, but she still had the powerful gossamer wings, long white hair, and muscular build of a Vapra warrior. Half the young males of our clan were in love with her, and so was Rian, which meant that I had about as much chance of winning her heart as I did of sprouting a third eyeball. But there was no harm in dreaming.

"Yeekkaa!" The shriek of a whirlijay just behind me set my heart pounding. Suddenly I felt as if I was being watched. "Don't think about the Hunter, don't think about the Hunter," I whispered to the rhythm of my crutches, thinking about nothing but the Hunter. Every crackling branch was his footstep; every gust of wind was his breath. I moved faster. The woods at night had always been dangerous, but after dreamfasting with Rian, I was more afraid than ever.

The moonlight cast long, heavy shadows on the grass. A second shadow was moving alongside mine. I spun around. Only trees stared back at me; the only sound I heard was the commotion of the storm. But when I turned and kept walking, the shadow continued alongside me. Something was following me, something alive. I reached for the hammer hanging from my belt. The Hunter wouldn't take me without a fight.

WHOOMP. A red-feathered ball hit me in the chest, knocking me flat on my back. I closed my eyes as the world spun around me.

"Kaelan!" called a voice, louder than the storming winds. "Kaelan, are you all right? Frolic, I told you to be careful."

The feathered ball on my chest rolled up to my chin and licked my face. Dazed, I opened my eyes to see a female Gelfling bent over me like something out of a dream. She held a bow in one hand and laid her other hand on my heart to feel it beating. "Are you hurt?" she asked. "For shame, Frolie."

A plump furry head peeked out from between the red feathers, licked me between the eyes, and whistled apologetically.

"Alethi," I gasped. "What are you doing out here?"

"I should ask you the same thing." Alethi clicked her tongue at me. "A bit bruised, I think, but you'll be all right. Up you come now." She grabbed me by the elbows and lifted me. Frolie rolled down my chest, spread his wings, and soared away. A second later he was back, perched on Alethi's shoulder and crooning softly.

It wasn't until I was on my feet again, until Alethi's hands were no longer touching me, that I remembered my urgent mission. "We need to find your father. Something horrible happened to Rian, and he can't stop shivering."

"Let me see him," she said. "I might be able to help."

"But he needs a healer," I protested.

Her eyes flashed with anger. "Don't you think I've learned anything from my father? Rian might not have much time. Besides, I can't carry you and my father both."

"Carry us?"

Alethi's gossamer wings spread from behind her back and flapped in the wind. "Just hang on to your crutches," she said, then picked me up by the armpits and launched into the air.

The sensation of flying was new to me. Among the Harath, winged females were forbidden from carrying males except in extreme danger. I found the feeling at once wonderful and terrifying. Stormy wind pummeled me from every side, and I felt Alethi's grip on me tighten. My stomach sank to my knees every time I looked down, but I couldn't stop looking. The tops of trees passed underneath us like grassy hills. Everything looked different from above. I wondered if birds could understand things we dirt-bound creatures never would.

Soon I saw the smithy pouring its gray smoke into the night. A moment later we alighted on my front lawn. I took a shaky step and

pitched wildly forward, barely catching my balance.

"I'm sorry," said Alethi, reaching out to steady me. "I should have warned you. Flying can take some getting used to."

I shook my head to clear it and kept walking. "I'll be fine. It's Rian I'm worried about."

"What happened to him?" she asked as we hurried inside.

I looked to Rian to help me explain, but his eyes were tightly closed now, and his breathing even. He had fallen asleep. "I—I'm not sure. He came in shivering, he could barely speak, and he said he was cold, so I built up the fire . . ."

I told her the story of the dreamfast, skekTek's laboratory, and the blue vial. While I blathered, she turned her attention to Rian, pushing back her cloak to bare strong, slender arms. She laid her hands on Rian's chest and began to hum as her three fingers traced slow circles over his tunic. She pressed her lips tight and held one ear forward, like someone listening for a whisper.

As I watched her, I felt a sudden twinge of jealousy that it was Rian who was ill, Rian who was being tended to, instead of me.

"There is cold in his soul," said Alethi quietly. "That's why the fire couldn't reach it to warm him."

"What can we do, then?"

"I'll sing for him," she answered simply. She lifted her chin and sang in a light, warm voice.

My feet belong on Skarith grass, where Gelfling children play

My ears still hear the rustling breeze in orchestras of hay

My heart will always beat with yours, however far we roam

O, Crystal bright, shine freedom's light forever on my home

The simple lullaby seemed to cast a spell on the little shop. As Alethi sang, the fire slowed to a gentle crackle, and its heat became less oppressive. The wind outside still howled, but it seemed playful now instead of threatening. I looked at her in wonder. Tears were trickling down her cheeks.

"What's the matter?" I asked. "Didn't it work?"

“It’s not that.” Alethi shook her head slowly. “He’ll be better when he wakes, I think.”

“Then what’s wrong?”

She closed her eyes and said nothing for a moment. “Everything is changing now. The plains are turning brown. Skarith is dying.”

I couldn’t say anything. I knew it was true; all the Gelfling did. The Skeksis insisted that all was well, that nothing could ever spoil the perfect balance of Thra, and we believed them because we wanted to believe them. But the evidence was hard to ignore. The once bright colors of the trees and flowers turned a little grayer with each passing trine. The crops grew a little smaller, and a few more animals left the plains for better pastures.

“There’s always the Crystal,” I said hopefully. “As long as the Crystal still shines, Skarith can’t die.”

Alethi hesitated. “I don’t know,” she said. “I want to believe you’re right. But the more I see what Thra is becoming, the harder it is to believe that the Crystal still exists. Maybe it never existed. Maybe it’s just a lie the Skeksis told to give us hope.”

“Or maybe,” said Rian, opening his eyes slowly, “it is the Skeksis who are to blame for the growing darkness.”

Chapter Two

Rian's Tale

Alethi and I both started at the sound of Rian's voice. "You're awake," Alethi exclaimed, jumping to her feet and rushing over to tend to him again. "How do you feel?"

"Warmer, thank you." Rian smiled, but the smile didn't last. He turned suddenly serious, as if remembering something he had forgotten. "Kaelan, Alethi—we're in danger. The Harath clan, and maybe the whole Gelfling race—we're all in danger. The Skeksis can't be trusted." He went to the door and pushed back the soot-festooned curtains to look outside.

"I know," I said. "I saw it in the dreamfast. I felt you touch the vial."

Rian bolted the door. "You didn't see everything in the dreamfast. Touching the vial was just the beginning. The moment my fingers brushed the glass, I felt a strange burst of cold in my blood, and I knew that something evil was afoot."

I nodded. "I felt it, too. The fear was so strong that when you cried out in the dreamfast, I cried out as well, here in the blacksmith's shop."

"I never cried out," he said gently. "The dreamfast must have affected you even more powerfully than it did me."

"But the vial!" I protested. "The horror! Isn't that what brought you here so cold?"

He shook his head. "That was only the beginning. It got worse. Much, much worse."

I flushed with shame. Rian hadn't been crying out in the dreamfast—only me, so overwhelmed by a fraction of my friend's fear that I screamed

like a Gelfling child waking up from a nightmare. Even the memory of Rian's adventures was too much for me.

"Don't be ashamed," said Alethi, seeing the embarrassment on my face. "A soft heart is a sign of great wisdom."

"Thanks," I said, turning away, wishing I could trade away all my wisdom and sensitivity for just a bit of Rian's boldness.

"Tell us what happened in the laboratory, Rian," Alethi urged.

Rian wiped thick beads of sweat from his brow, leaned back, and began to speak:

I was sure the parchments beside the vial held the key to explaining the blue liquid and the strange horror I felt when I touched it. I began looking through the documents, but they were all written in a script I couldn't understand. Only the pictures made sense to me: Gelfling from different clans, Skeksis, Podlings, and machines built from shards of crystal. I was on the verge of giving up and returning to my post when I heard voices in the hallway. High, thin Skeksis voices.

"I didn't know what I had discovered, but I knew skekTek wouldn't be pleased to find me inside his laboratory. There was no other door besides the one I had come from, no avenue of escape, not even a window. So I hid underneath the desk, hoping the burgundy cloth would hang low enough to cover my trembling body. I hid not a second too soon. The cloth was still swaying when the Skeksis entered.

"Door wide open?" said an incredulous voice.

"Mmmm," whimpered a second voice. "All the better for us, General."

"A vial of essence," said the General eagerly, stomping toward my hiding place and bringing the smell of rotting meat with him. "It's mine." There was a thud on the desk and a clink of crystal.

“No!” the other voice shrieked. “Patience. Why take one vial when you could have them all?”

The General growled, “Another one of your games, Chamberlain?”

Humming from his throat, the Chamberlain took a step nearer. “Drink the vial, and skekTek will never trust you. But leave it be, let me tell Scientist a story, and he will give all the essence we need. Then we will overthrow the Emperor.”

“You speak treason, Chamberlain.”

“But of course, my General. Or should I say, my Emperor, mmmm?”

“Mmmm,” agreed the General. “But why would I trust you?”

“Because when skekSo is dead, you will put make me second in power. I have no wish to hold scepter. But to rule Gelfling . . . mmmm. Chamberlain can help General, and General can help Chamberlain. Quick, skekTek is coming! The feather!”

A bright purple whirlijay feather floated onto the floor near my feet. Moments later, I saw a new set of clawed feet in the doorway and heard a new voice cry out, “Treason! Treachery!”

“Yes!” the Chamberlain shouted. “Treason! Call the guards! Scientist, thank the Emperor you’re here.”

The Scientist hesitated. “Caught in the act,” he said with a bit less conviction. “Chamberlain and General stealing the emperor’s essence.”

“Not stealing,” said the Chamberlain innocently. “Protecting from the traitor skekEkt. We followed him here and

saw him try to steal essence. Gelfling guard wasn't here to stop him. When skekEkt saw us, he ran. We stayed to protect essence from thieves. If we were traitors, why not just drink essence ourselves?"

"You lie," spat the Scientist. "SkekEkt is loyal."

"What's this? Did loyal skekEkt leave one of the feathers of his plume behind in Scientist's laboratory?"

A leathery hand picked up the purple feather. "It's his!" the Scientist screeched. "Traitor! False friend!"

"Mmmm, yes," gargled the Chamberlain. "SkekEkt must be made to pay. And Gelfling guard, of course."

SkekTek walked dangerously close to my hiding spot and pounded his table against the desk. "I'll deal with the Gelfling myself. I have just the punishment for him. As for skekEkt, Emperor skekSo will hear of his treachery."

"No, Scientist," the Chamberlain simpered. "SkekEkt is too close to the throne. Emperor will not believe us. We must save the Emperor from himself. General skekVar must accuse skekEkt in court tomorrow and challenge him to trial by rope. When General wins, skekEkt will be banished."

"Good, good," said skekTek.

The Chamberlain hummed appreciatively and then paused. "But what if General loses?"

"SkekVar does not lose," the General growled.

"General was just telling me," said the Chamberlain slowly, "that he feels weaker than usual . . . drained. If only we could be sure General feels young and strong tomorrow."

“Mmmm,” said the General. “Yes, drained.”

“Chamberlain would never ask for essence for himself,” croaked the Chamberlain sweetly. “But for General . . . for the Emperor . . .”

“Essence belongs to the Emperor.” The Scientist dropped his voice. “You speak treason.”

“. . . save the Emperor from himself . . . ,” the Chamberlain whispered.

There was a long pause. “You’re right,” said the Scientist at last. “But not this vial. I’m still testing it. Come underground for a fresh one.”

I heard a grinding sound, and the whole room began to rattle. The table above my head shook so violently that I was afraid the cloth would slide off and expose me to the Skeksis. When it finished, the Scientist said, “Follow me,” and I saw their feet move away from the desk.

For a fleeting moment, I thought they would leave the vial on the desk behind. I could steal it and bring it to the clan elders, who would discover what vile thing was inside. But the Skeksis had barely walked three paces before the Chamberlain said, “You aren’t leaving this vial behind?”

“No, right you are,” said the Scientist. “Traitors on the loose.” His stench came close once more, then faded. The sound of the Skeksis’s footsteps floated away and out of earshot.

I lay under the desk for a minute or two after they left, trying to quiet my racing breath. At first, I had every intention of escaping the castle right then, while the Skeksis were busy in skekTek’s workshop. But there was one unanswered question that bothered me. What was this essence that the Skeksis were

arguing over? I thought of the strange coldness that had run through me when I touched the vial of blue liquid. I looked along the west wall of the laboratory, where a whole shelf of parchments had slid to one side to reveal an eerie, lantern-lit tunnel. I knew that the answer to the mystery of essence lay within it. If I didn't find an answer now, I never would.

I took a deep breath, gripped my spear tightly—I wished I had your broadsword with me, Kaelan—and followed them.

Jagged rocks lined the pathway of the tunnel, and I was careful not to trip over them as I entered. Trickling water and wet mud sloshed against my bare feet. The shadowy walls were covered with crude, sinister-looking drawings. My hands tingled when I touched the walls; I think they had been cut by magic. Ahead of me, I could still hear the murmur of the Skeksis's voices. The tunnel grew thinner as it went, then took a sharp left turn and opened into a huge, dank cavern.

The first thing I saw was a cage along the nearest edge of the cavern built of rusted iron bars. There were dozens of prisoners trapped inside it; I was so close that I could hear them breathing, but they didn't notice me. Most of them were Podlings—their short stature, green skin, and bulbous noses made it obvious. The others were Gelfling from each of the clans—some I recognized only because I'd heard stories about them. One had a huge belly and was totally covered with hair, head to toe—a Drenchen, I think. Another was a Grottan with pale skin, a thick beard, and eyes of solid black. Spriton, Vapra, Sifa, Dousan—they were all there, standing side by side, as different as it's possible for Gelfling to be.

But for all their differences, they seemed strangely alike. Even the Podlings and the Gelfling were alike, in a way. Each one looked unnaturally old and thin, though their bodies still appeared young. They stood silently against the cage bars,

staring out past the bars without seeming to care what they saw. They looked hollow, like shells abandoned on the sand. It was as if they were plants instead of living creatures.

The Skeksis stood in the middle of the cavern near what I assumed was one of skekTek's inventions. It was a twisted hunk of stone and metal like an overgrown altar, with four shards of crystal hovering above its four horned points. Jagged beams of pink light bounced from one crystal to another, making the device seem alive.

"It is ready," said skekTek. "Stand back."

The other two Skeksis shuffled away, revealing a metal chair shaped like a throne. Chains, ropes, and manacles of every size dangled from it. Inside the chair, bound hand and foot and with a clamp around his neck to hold his head in place, was a Gelfling. His mouth was stuffed with a dirty gag to keep him from crying out, but I could see his muscles straining against the chains. Scars covered his arms and chest; his left ear had been torn off, a gnarled stump in its place. The shadows made it hard to see his face well, but I thought there was something familiar about him.

SkekTek pulled a small lever. Beams shot out of the four crystals and met in the center of the machine. Their glow grew more intense as the machine whirred and coughed. Then a single glaring beam shot out and stretched across the cavern to the trapped Gelfling, illuminating his face.

It was Aedan.

Alethi gasped. I gripped my crutch more tightly, biting my lip to stay silent. Rian, knowing the sensation he had caused, said nothing.

"Aedan?" I said finally, trying to keep my voice calm. "The same Aedan who disappeared two moons ago? The matriarch's son?"

Rian closed his eyes and dropped his head in assent.

“But he’s dead,” Alethi objected. “The whole village was at his Ceremony of Passing. He was killed and eaten by the Hunter. The search party found what was left of his body.”

“The search party found what they were supposed to find,” said Rian heavily. “His shredded cloak and tunic. Blood. Bones. His severed ear. We believed what the Skeksis wanted us to believe.”

“But why?” I asked, my face turning hot with fury. “What do they want with him?”

Rian walked to the window, turning his back on Alethi and me. “I don’t think it had to be Aedan. I think it could have been anyone. He was probably just convenient.” Rian spat out the last word as if it tasted bitter.

“Convenient for what?” Even as the question left my lips, I was beginning to realize the answer. The image of the blue vial, with all its accompanying horror, burst into my mind like an unwelcome guest. I shuddered.

Still staring out the window, Rian continued his story to the howling wind.

“When the light reached Aedan, the muscles in his face pulled forward. His eyes widened, as if he was fascinated by what he saw. And then—I don’t know how to explain it—his body started to deflate. His cheeks pulled inward, his eyes sank back, and the muscles in his arms and legs shriveled away until his body was little more than a skeleton with skin stretched over it.

“‘Mmmm,’ said the General. His tongue writhed hungrily across his beak.

“It wasn’t until I saw the vial underneath Aedan’s arm, until I heard the gentle trickle of bright blue liquid filling it, that everything finally became clear. This was essence—liquid life—and the Skeksis were stealing and drinking it to keep themselves youthful. The creatures in the cage were still living, but they were gone. Aedan—he was gone, too.

“Darkness washed over me and crushed me like a waterfall. I wanted to stop watching, but I couldn’t; my eyes were glued to Aedan’s empty ones. He stared right through me without ever seeing me. SkekVar swooped down and snatched the vial in one claw, emptying it into his beak. His scabrous black skin began to stretch as his muscles bulged. He was changing, gaining everything Aedan had lost, but the difference was less

for him than it had been for Aedan. To the Skeksis, what had been a Gelfling's whole lifeblood was just the youth of a few trine. He roared with new strength—Aedan's strength.

"Before the Skeksis had even turned around, while they were still ogling skekTek's diabolical machine, somehow I found the strength to make it out of the tunnel, out of skekTek's laboratory, out of the castle. I stumbled to the nearest copse of trees at the edge of the Dark Wood, and as soon as I got there, I started weeping. I was safe."

Rian choked over those last words, and I knew that he was thinking of Aedan. I walked over to him and leaned my crutches against the windowpane. "There was nothing you could have done to save him."

He pretended not to hear me. "Safe. That was my first thought when I reached the Dark Wood: my own safety. After everything that happened to Aedan, after seeing all those other Gelfling and Podlings robbed of essence, all I could feel was relief that it wasn't me. No selflessness, no heroism. Just a Gelfling child with a sharp stick trying to save his own skin."

I didn't have an answer for that. If even a warrior like Rian couldn't be a hero, I knew there was no hope for a cripple like me. We stood there in silence, staring out at the darkness and hating ourselves.

"I should have died with the rest of them," said Rian. "I should have died trying to save Aedan."

"And if you had died," said Alethi from the hearth, "what would that have changed? Nothing. By bringing everything you've learned back to the clan, you're honoring the ones who died. Aedan would have wanted you to stay alive, to spread the truth."

Rian spun to face her, his temper sparked. "You think Aedan would have wanted me to be a coward?"

"You're the bravest Gelfling I know." Alethi walked to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "But bravery without wisdom is just dressed-up pride. Sometimes the bravest thing you can do is stay alive to fight another day."

"I will fight," said Rian firmly. "If nothing else, I promise you that."

"You won't fight alone. I'll do everything in my power to help you." Alethi gazed into his eyes so deeply that I again felt jealousy growl inside of me.

“And so will I, of course,” I interrupted. “I would beat down the Castle of the Crystal with my crutches if I could. But we’re not strong enough. The Skeksis are twice our size, and they have weapons we don’t even understand. There’s no way we can defeat them.”

“You’re right, Kaelan,” Rian agreed. “We can’t defeat them, not alone. Even if we had the whole Harath clan with us, we would be no match for the Skeksis. But if we could unite all seven of the Gelfling clans—if we could bring all of Thra together to fight—then maybe we would have a chance.”

“But the clans haven’t been united for almost a hundred trine,” Alethi said, frowning. “My father told me that all the clans used to gather for a festival every trine while the matriarchs of each clan held council with the queen. Over time, the rivalries between them became so fierce that they chose to stop gathering in order to preserve harmony. Now the clans live as peaceful strangers, indifferent to one another. We trade with each other, and the matriarchs still submit to the queen’s authority, but we’re not the unified race we used to be. We aren’t enemies, but we’re not allies, either.”

“We’ll have to be allies if we want to live,” said Rian grimly. “Without all the clans, Thra won’t survive. We need each other, no matter what rivalries may be lurking in our past.”

A moment passed before he added, “Even though those warmongering Spritons do make me ashamed to be a Gelfling—I’d rather chop off my ear-tips and pretend to be a Podling than admit I’m related to them.”

Alethi gave him a reproving look. “If you want unity as much as you say, you’d better watch your tongue.”

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Rian laughed. “I know, I know. There’s no way the other clans will trust me if I start our friendship by insulting them.”

“And what if they still don’t trust you?” I asked. “You’re a stranger to them, and it’s not good news that you’re bringing. If I were in one of the other clans, I would be looking for an excuse—any excuse—to believe that your whole story was just an elaborate hoax.”

“Rian wouldn’t lie about something as important as this!” Alethi protested.

“Of course he wouldn’t,” I agreed. “And I know that. But the other clans won’t. It’s in the Gelfling nature to turn a blind eye to evil. Just look how long our clan has watched the plains of Skarith die and pretended nothing is wrong—we’d rather believe an easy lie than a difficult truth. I doubt even the Harath clan will look kindly on the messenger who comes to tell them that their world is crumbling and everything they’ve known about the world since the Second Great Conjunction has been a lie.”

“Always the optimist, aren’t you?” Rian smiled mysteriously. “You’re right, Kaelan; the truth won’t be what the Gelfling clans want to hear. But don’t worry. I promise you, they’ll believe me.”

I shook my head at the self-assured smile I knew so well. “How can you know that?”

“Because I have proof.”

He reached under his chainmail coat into the pocket of his tunic and pulled out several yellowed sheets of parchment. We gasped.

“Those aren’t—” Alethi stammered.

“—skekTek’s parchments?” I finished.

Rian nodded. “Just a few of them—I didn’t want him to discover they were gone immediately. As long as he thinks I’m just a lazy guard who missed a shift, I’m less of a threat. Still, parchments or no parchments, I’m dead once he finds me, so I decided to make the most of the opportunity.”

“Are you sure it was worth the risk?” Alethi asked, her eyes bright with fear.

Rian’s jaw clenched firmly. “Since that beam of blue light opened the door to skekTek’s laboratory, every move I’ve made has been a risk. There’s no such thing as safety anymore, not for me. The only thing I can do is fight against the Skeksis with everything I’ve got. This way, at least I’ve got evidence when I go to the clans. And hopefully it slows down skekTek’s foul science for a few days.”

“Which parchments did you steal?” I asked.

“See for yourself.” He held them out to me. “Maybe you’ll be able to make more sense of them than I could.”

“Doubtful,” I said, staring at the strange symbols and sinister-looking sketches.

“There’s something else I’ve been wondering,” Alethi said to Rian. “How was a ray of light shining through a vial able to open skekTek’s laboratory?”

Rian shrugged. “I’ve never seen or even heard of anything like it.”

“Nor have I,” said Alethi slowly. “Unless . . . but that’s not possible.”

“What?” Rian urged.

Alethi knelt down in front of the forge fire. For a long time she said nothing. Then she sighed. “My father told me that long ago, before the Second Great Conjunction, there were stories of the Great Crystal coming alive whenever the harmony of Thra was threatened.”

Rian’s forehead wrinkled. “What do you mean, ‘coming alive’?”

“I don’t know, exactly. But according to the stories, the Crystal had the power to create change—to start a fire, or open a door, or save a life—in ways that would shape the destiny of Thra. And I thought maybe the light that came out of the vial had something to do with the Crystal. Maybe the Crystal *wanted* you to discover skekTek’s laboratory, to see what you saw, to bring the Gelfling clans together.”

“It’s as good a theory as any,” said Rian. “And maybe, if the Crystal meant for all this to happen, it will turn out all right in the end. Maybe we’ll save the Gelfling clans and restore balance to Thra.”

Alethi turned to him with tears brimming in her eyes. “I wish you were right. But it’s not possible.”

“Why not?”

A single tear slid down her cheek. “Because if the Crystal had the power to shape Thra’s destiny, it never would have let the Skeksis crack it and turn the world dark.”

Rian said nothing.

I set skekTek’s parchments on my anvil with a sigh. “I don’t understand any of it—not the Crystal, not even these parchments. I’ve never seen script like this before.”

“My father may know how to read it,” said Alethi, running her slender fingers across the pages. “And if not, perhaps he’ll know someone who can.”

Rian pulled his cloak around him and moved toward the door. “We’ll go to your father’s house, then. But we can’t stay long—we need to warn

the matriarch and the clan elders. And then I need to get out of Skarith, out of the Skeksis's reach."

"Can't it wait at least till morning?" Alethi followed him and caught his hand in hers. She didn't seem able to stop touching him. "It's dangerous to travel outside Skarith so late after nightfall."

"The Skeksis may not wait that long," said Rian without looking up. "Besides, I'm beginning to believe that every danger we've feared for so long is really just another one of the Skeksis's disguises."

"Even the Hunter?" asked Alethi.

"Especially the Hunter." Rian's eyes darkened in anger. "Come on, let's go."

I reached for my crutches. Rian turned to me with a strained expression on his face.

"Kaelan," he said slowly, "perhaps it's best if you stay here. If we stay together and we're caught, the truth dies with us."

"You're worried I'll slow you down," I blurted out.

"It's not that!" Rian reddened. "The danger is too great. If Skeksis come looking for me here and find the smithy empty, they'll know you're involved somehow."

"I don't care what they know." I slammed my fist on the heavy oak table. "I'm every bit as willing to fight as you are."

Rian smiled sadly. "You've always been a fighter, Kaelan. But not every battle is won with a sword. I need someone who can stay with the Harath clan and keep an eye on the Skeksis; someone they won't think of as a threat."

"Who's threatened by a cripple?" I said bitterly.

"Please, Kaelan," Rian implored. "I don't have time to argue with you right now. The Skeksis could come looking for me any minute."

Alethi, who had been standing at the window, turned to us, her face a mask of horror. "Too late."

There was a heavy knock at the door.

Chapter Three

Into the Fire

Rian cursed under his breath and reached for a sword hanging on the wall. “They won’t take me alive,” he said firmly. “I swear by Skarith there won’t be an ounce of essence left in me by the time skekTek gets his claws on me.”

I shook my head. “If you fight today, you’ll die today, and the hope of Thra will be gone.”

The heavy knocking continued. “Open up!” called a shrill voice.

“Coming!” I shouted back. I turned to Rian and Alethi and dropped my voice. “Hide. Both of you. Go down to the coal cellar, into the back room, and lock it from the inside.”

“I’m not letting you face the Skeksis alone,” Rian whispered fiercely, staring me down.

I stared back, unflinching. “You don’t have a choice.”

“Open in the name of Emperor skekSo!” shrieked the voice outside.

“Give me a moment, for pity’s sake!” I yelled. “I’m just a poor cripple living alone.”

Rian gave me a long, reluctant look. His eyes were full of things there wasn’t time to say.

“Go,” I said softly. “It will be all right. Go.”

He and Alethi slipped through the cellar door. Once it closed behind them, I picked up my crutches, hobbled to the door, and slid the bolt back.

Immediately the door burst open and a huge creature pushed his way inside the little smithy. Because of my injury, I rarely saw the Skeksis and had never learned to tell them apart from one another, but there was no

mistaking that this was one of them. Vulturelike head, flaking, leathery skin, long, bony fingers, and a foul smell. I tried not to gag.

“Where is he?” the Skeksis croaked, standing so close to me that I could see insects crawling between the folds of his reeking robe.

“I’m sorry,” I answered, “I don’t know what you’re talking about. Who are you looking for?”

Growling, the Skeksis grabbed the sturdy oak table and toppled it, sending hammers and half-finished tools flying. “I know he’s here,” cried the intruder. “No one lies to skekVar. Where are you hiding, Gelfling?” Bits of wood showered the room as the General began destroying the rest of Kratos’s meager furniture.

“Please,” I begged, trying to look as pitiful and crippled as I could. “Please, sir, I’m just a blacksmith. I’ve done nothing wrong. If you’d tell me who you’re looking for, I’d be happy to help.”

The General turned on me, breathing heavily. “I seek Gelfling named Rian. Was told I would find him here.”

“And you would have found him here on any other day,” I said, my eyes wide with false sincerity. “But he never stopped by to see me today. I’ve been worried sick about him—is he in some kind of trouble?”

My guest gnashed his beak angrily. “He stole something of Emperor skekSo’s—something of great value. He will return it, or he will pay the penalty.”

I raised a hand to my forehead, hoping I seemed surprised. “That sounds horrible. I can’t believe Rian would do something like that. Are you sure there hasn’t been some mistake?”

“SkekVar makes no mistakes.”

“If he turns up,” I lied, “I promise you, you’ll be the first one I tell.”

SkekVar looked me up and down with beady red eyes. He seemed inclined to trust me, but I couldn’t be sure. “You won’t mind me searching your shop, mmmm?”

“Of course,” I said, “of course. Whatever you need.”

I leaned on my crutches and watched the General search. I willed him to believe me, willed him not to check the coal cellar, and to give up his hunt long enough for Rian to get away. I willed it all so hard that I worried skekVar could hear my thoughts leaking into the air.

“What’s this?” said the General, drumming his skeletal fingers against the cellar door. “Where does it lead?”

Beads of sweat burst on my forehead. It took all my concentration to keep my voice calm. “Just an old cellar entrance. I haven’t unlocked it for several trine, not since the old blacksmith died. Stairs are hard for me, you understand.”

SkekVar accepted the explanation without question and kept moving. I breathed a sigh of relief. The danger was past.

Or so I thought.

“What’s this?” the General asked again. He pointed to something sitting on top of the anvil—a stack of parchments.

My heart stopped.

“It’s just . . . ,” I stammered, making a beeline for the anvil as fast as my crutches would carry me. “Just a few . . .”

“Oh?” SkekVar took a step toward me, reaching for the parchments. His eyes were hungry. “Mmmm,” he gargled.

In a single swift motion, I seized the stack and threw it into the crackling fire. “Failed designs,” I finished. “Just a few failed designs. I’ve been meaning to burn them.” I sighed and watched with regret as Rian’s evidence, his greatest tool for uniting the Gelfling clans, blackened and crumbled into ashes.

Nancy Gray

Chosen

Prelude

“I feel the rocks growing restless, and the crystals are singing a sad song for the village beneath the darkening castle. The lies of the Skeksis are poison that turns Gelfling against Gelfling. Poison, yes. All hope lies on the shoulders of a Skeksis servant and a sailor. A traitor and a fool.”

—Aughra

“Traitors and fools, Mother? The last time that the Gelfling turned against their masters, I was the cause. If one of these Gelfling is indeed a fool, then this is where I find my opportunity to strike at the usurpers once again. I will place the book right in the sailor’s hands.”

—Raunip

Chapter One

Roseport

“I’m going to find it today. Today everything is going to change.”
Zale said, grinning at his father.

He began to rummage around, looking for the final supplies to take on his trip. Before he went outside, he fastened a silver-and-black rag around his tawny hair to keep it out of his eyes, then put on his silver-and-black coat over his simple clothing.

His father followed him and sighed. “Are you sure that you want to get on that sailboat in this weather?”

“Ship, not sailboat, and yes. I’m very sure.”

Zale checked his ship one last time to see if everything was in order. The Nebrie hide sails were slightly battered from the last storm, but they still seemed very strong. While the paint was peeling on the side of *The Seastrider*, all of the wood was sturdy and not one board was loose. He had enough dried rations for a few days. After all, if he found the island, he would want to explore it.

“I know that you’re too stubborn to listen to me, but please just promise me that you’ll turn back if the sea is angry.” Zale’s father looked at him with pleading gray blue eyes and continued, “I can feel Thra stirring, and I know that you can, too.”

He didn’t want to admit his father was right, but as he closed his eyes to listen to the wind and the sea, he could tell that Thra intended to demonstrate Her power. But, instead of feeling that She was angry, Zale felt more that She was excited and wanted to play. Just like in his dreams, Thra was calling to him.

“I’ll be fine, Da.”

“You know that you don’t have to prove anything to me.”

Zale pretended to check his supplies again in order to avoid his father’s gaze, “I know. But I can feel that the island is there. I’ve dreamed about it. Thra is telling me to go. Just keep the light lit for me.”

He glanced up at the lighthouse. It was a long tower carved into the white stone of the plateau. It looked almost like an extension of the cliff itself, not taking away from the beauty of the promontory. It stood out just enough to be seen, with the exception of the large crystal set on the top to reflect the light of the flare onto the ocean. The keeper’s little domed house next to it wasn’t so much small as cozy. It also was built into the cliffside, with a welcoming sort of simplicity, a shelter within the protective stone. It was also Zale’s home, and his father was the keeper. The lighthouse was the reason that the village of Roseport was so prosperous. Many different clans sailed from all over Thra to trade their goods.

His father chuckled, “You know very well that I always keep it lit. I’m sorry. I know that you’re old enough to take care of yourself, but I can’t help worrying. You’re so like your mother.”

Zale swallowed the lump forming in his throat. He clutched the pendant around his neck, remembering how much he admired it when it belonged to her. “I know, and I miss her, too.” He glanced up at the rose-colored stone on the top of the cliffside. “But she’s always watching over me. I got my instincts from her, and I intend to follow them *this* time.”

His father put a hand on his shoulder. “I know you will. And even if you don’t, you’ll have Eily with you to keep your recklessness in check.”

Zale grinned roguishly. “I can’t help that. After all, I got it from you.” And then he ran playfully in the direction of the village.

The streets were lined with merchants setting up temporary tents to sell their wares, in front of small domed houses built close to the cliffside with sandstone and weathered rock. Seashells cobbled the rough streets and adorned the houses. The sea spray clung to the shells, making them sparkle like the scales of a slider eel wriggling in the net of a Gelfling fisher. A few of the merchants struggled with their tents, trying to make sure that the wind didn’t blow them away. It was always windy along the coast of the Silver Sea, but today the wind was a show of force. It made

Zale grin at the thought of trying to tame it. Even though the clouds in the distance looked dark, he felt sure he could outpace the storm and once again win the race against Thra.

Two Podlings were also trying desperately to set up their tent before the wind could blow it away, but their small size was making it very difficult. One of them looked like she was too old to be doing such hard work, with her round, wrinkled face and long white hair, while the other looked years too young, hardly much older than a child. Zale frowned. He had heard the rumors that the Podlings were disappearing all over Thra, but he never dreamed that it had gotten so bad. Normally there would be several Podlings in one tent touting their wares, all of them in their prime, but these two looked like they were desperate to trade. He rushed forward and grabbed one corner of the tent, staking it to the ground as quickly as he could and helping them hold it steady while the young Podling boy staked the rest of the corners.

The white-haired Podling put her hand over Zale's and said, "Fala Vam."

Zale didn't need to know the language to understand the look of gratitude on her face. He smiled back. The boy took out some Nebrie cheese wrapped in pod leaf and handed it to Zale. He tried to refuse it, but the boy shoved it back into his hand and nodded.

He shrugged. "Fala Vam?"

The old Podling nodded her head.

The two Podlings began to arrange turblaroots and more Nebrie cheese on the table. Zale glanced at the bag of supplies over his shoulder and sighed. He had a few seeds that he was intending to eat as dried rations. While they made good dried rations, to the Podlings any Sifa seed would be a rare find that could be traded for many goods back in their village. Zale took the bag of assorted seeds from his pack and motioned at all of the roots and Nebrie cheeses. The mouth of the young Podling hung open in surprise.

The old Podling opened the bag, and her beady eyes grew wide. Zale motioned at the contents of the table again, signifying he wanted to trade the seeds for their goods. She motioned at the boy, and he immediately began to put the contents of the entire table into a large sack.

The boy grinned at her and whispered, "Gorah, viseligche!"

It was nice to see her genuine smile. Zale held on to that thought, took his bag of Podling food, and wandered toward the fishing homes. The locals typically gave him dirty looks as he passed. He was used to being considered the village fool. He smiled and waved in exaggeration at those scowling at him.

Well, I did need supplies for the journey, though I'm not a big fan of turblaroots or Nebrie cheese. Oh well, food is food. Those Podlings needed the seeds more than I did. If only I could make my neighbors here that happy. One day, I'll earn their trust again. . . .

As he began to reach the fishing homes a familiar voice called out, "Zale, Zale!"

He turned and grabbed the little girl just as she was trying to tackle him, tickling her mercilessly. She giggled and squirmed under his arms, laughing in the carefree way that only a young Gelfling could. Then Zale propped her up on his shoulders and pretended to be a Landstrider. He smiled slightly, noticing how she looked just like a younger version of her sister. "Sherilie, you get bigger every time I see you."

The little girl beamed and said, "Big!"

"Where is Eily?"

"She's with Ma and Da. Why?"

"I'm taking her on another adventure."

Sherilie began to bounce on his shoulders. "I wanna go."

"Not this time, but I promise I'll teach you to sail when you're older. Maybe one day I'll even build a ship for you."

The little girl kicked her legs in excitement. Zale flinched as her heel struck him in the ear. "Is this how you treat your striders?"

Sherilie pointed straight ahead. "Go, strider!"

Zale shrieked in a high-pitched impersonation of a Landstrider's whistling cry and ran in the direction of Eily's house. It wasn't the largest of the fisher homes, but it was, in his opinion, the most beautiful. The house was made of sandstone that matched the white sand of the beach perfectly. Shells of rich oranges, pinks, and reds outlined the doors and windows, and rose ivy crept up the sides, making the home look as though it were in perpetual sunset. However, Zale loved the way the place *felt* far more than the way it looked. He deeply breathed in the scent. It made him feel whole. He felt her family's honest, warm familiarity so keenly that it

made him ache to be a part of it. In comparison, his lighthouse was a beacon of loneliness. However, today he felt something was a little bit off. He could sense tension in the air.

Zale glanced up at Sherilie. She could sense it as well. She had a frown on her face and looked like she was about to cry as she stared at the door. Zale gently set her down and rummaged through his pack, “Sher, I have some Nebrie cheese here. Will you take it and trade it for some sweetsap clusters for the both of us?”

The little girl’s expression immediately brightened. “Thank you, Zale!”

As Sherilie ran toward the merchant tents, Zale put his head against the door and listened.

Eily snapped, “I don’t care about the weather. I’m going sailing today.”

Her father said, “That boy is a bad influence on you. If you keep spending so much time with him, everyone will get the wrong idea and no one will approach you.”

“He’s my friend.”

Her mother sighed heavily and muttered, “Will you at least stay? The striders are restless. This storm is going to be dangerous. The air feels heavy—”

“I promised I would go. Besides, we’ve sailed through worse storms before.”

Her father groaned, “Please, Eily. You need to think seriously about this. You can’t sail into the setting suns forever. Soon you’ll have to grow up. Think about your future.”

“I am. That’s why I’m going.”

Her father muttered, “If you’re having trouble choosing, the village elder can help. When she gets back from the Council, we can consult her on the matter. Claw Mountain is a long way away, so it will give you more time.”

“I don’t want to consult the elder. If I *have* to pick someone, then I’ll do it.”

Her mother sighed. “Eily, we just want what’s best for you. We love you.”

“I love you, too. But I need more time to think about it. Today, I’m going to search for an island. If I find it, I’ll have another choice, won’t I?”

Zale tried to step back as the door swung open, but Eily bumped right into him, nearly knocking him over. He blinked at her for a moment. Her brown hair was loose, hanging wavy around her face, and her tunic was tucked neatly into a long woven skirt. Her hair stunned him the most. She usually pulled it back into a braid or a low ponytail to keep it from being buffeted by the wind. With it loose around her face, she looked *pretty*. It made him feel as though he should look away, as if he had caught her at a bad time.

Eily just rolled her eyes at him. “You really are a bad influence you know, spying on other Gelfling. Are you ready to go?”

Sherilie ran toward them holding three sweetsap clusters on sticks and grinning from ear to ear. She handed two to Zale and then dove into hers as though it were going to run away.

As they walked in the direction of the docks, Zale handed one to Eily. “Have a bite to eat first. With the way you were exercising your jaws, you might need some more energy.”

“Har har. This does look pretty good, though.”

They sat, watching the sea as they enjoyed the sweet delicacy. Off in the distance, Zale saw a large creature with silver, shimmering skin breaking the surface of the water. Crystalwhales were breaching. They were singing in low, undulating tones that sounded almost sad.

Sherilie frowned. “Do you think Thra is crying?”

Zale smiled. “No, sweetie. Crystalwhales always sound like that.”

“Why do they shine? That one looks like it has a crystal nose.” She pointed at her own face.

“They swallow crystals to digest the sea crawlies they eat. Sometimes that makes other crystals grow on their skin and bones. See how my charm shines? It’s made of crystalwhale bone.”

Sherilie listened to the whales for a moment and then suddenly began to cry. “Thra is crying. I can hear her.”

Eily picked her little sister up and hugged her. “What makes you say that, Sherilie?”

Sherilie sniffed. “Can’t you hear it?”

Zale felt a shiver run down his spine. He thought he did hear something, not with his ears, but with his heart. It was something low, like a strange resonance beneath the earth. He had a feeling that its source was very far away, but it was as though the crystals within the ground were wailing. The whale song seemed to be in unison with the outcry for a moment, as though the somber tone was resonating within their very bones. Somehow, it made him feel sad. The doleful song combined with the backdrop of thick, heavy storm clouds made him almost want to give in to his father's advice.

No, he thought. *I can feel it. I dreamed of that island. Today is the day.*

Zale swallowed his last bite of sweetsap. "I'm ready now. Let's go."

Chapter Two

Uncharted

Zale pulled the crystal lens away from his eye and muttered a curse beneath his breath that he hoped Eily wouldn't hear above the howling winds. The stress of the voyage was getting to both of them. He could almost feel the accusing glance from her intelligent, mud-brown eyes. Eily's hair was plastered against her head like seaweed, and her tunic and wings billowed out behind her like sails. It struck him that at that moment she didn't look like much of a sailor, but then neither did he, really. The rag holding Zale's hair back was in danger of being blown away. He knew that his coat, though crafted with more care and better material, was weathering over the years as well; the silver-and-black designs had faded until the coat looked mostly gray. But, it held too many good memories to simply be replaced.

From the way that Eily was struggling with the sails and frowning up at the overcast sky, she was clearly thinking what Zale already knew—they were lost, and the boat was being tossed around like a Fizzgig in the jaws of a whoof.

Standing up, Eily shouted, "We need to try to turn back. I don't think the boat can handle this storm."

Zale corrected her. "Ship, not boat. And, you know that I would never let my ship be torn apart. I would rather return to Thra as a skittering stone in another life than to lose *The Seastrider*."

"Fine, *ship*. We've lost sight of the coastline and the light from your father's lighthouse. I think Thra is telling us that we need to go back."

“If we’ve lost sight of the coast, that means that Thra wants us to keep going. Besides, I know that we’ll reach the island anytime now. It’s just hard to see with all of this rain pouring off the sight crystal.”

“The Silver Sea is punishing us for using Nebrie sails.”

Zale turned and fixed his silvery-gray eyes on Eily. “You should be thanking Thra that we have these sails at all. Anything thinner than Nebrie hide would be torn apart by these winds. Besides, if I don’t use them, then the Nebrie would have died for no reason. Now help me steer.”

Eily frowned and stared at the sails as though she wanted to say more, but instead she just muttered, “Well, it would help if you would tell me which way you want to go.”

The rain was pelting Zale so hard that it stung. He flinched as he glanced up at the sky. Even though the third sun hadn’t set entirely, there was hardly enough light to see anything at all. The clouds were puffy and thick, and as purple as a fresh bruise. In the distance, the edge of the storm was turning a sickly green color that he knew was an ill omen. He couldn’t see the stars, and none of the three moons would be visible until the last sun sunk below the horizon. There was no way to orient the ship towards the coastline.

“Just try to keep us on top of the water for now. We’ll have to wait out this storm before we can go anywhere. Just pray that the waves don’t get any higher.”

Eily muttered under her breath, “That’s what I figured. Typical Zale—if there’s trouble just ride it out. But then, I guess if I had a good-luck charm I would, too.”

He flicked his ear in irritation at Eily to show that he heard her insult, but he didn’t dignify it with a response. His mind was too preoccupied with the weather for any more banter. The winds had died down too abruptly, and their sails were going limp. Even the rain that had pelted him only moments before had come to a stop. The clouds behind the two Gelfling were bulging downward as though they were about to give birth, and from the way they swirled around, forming a whirlpool in the sky, he knew what they were about to produce.

Eily whispered, “I don’t like this.”

Off in the distance, a thick, silvery tendril of water swirled and twisted upward to meet the bulge in the cloud until it formed a long, dark

funnel. Zale watched in horrified fascination. It would've been a beautiful and awe-inspiring sight if he wasn't on the ocean, but right now it was the last thing he wanted to see—and could, indeed, be the last thing he ever saw.

Eily shouted, “*Waterspout!*”

Zale rushed to the other side of the ship and peered through the seeing crystal, trying to look for any evidence of land. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see that the funnel cloud was looming closer and closer. Even though it was only by intuition, he felt sure that there was land just out of sight of the lighthouse. It was what he first crafted his ship to find.

“Ship.” Who am I kidding? Eily’s right—we’re on a sailboat! An overglorified sailboat! If those twisting winds come within a mile of us, we’ll be sucked out of the water and spat out like rotten crawlies.

Zale put the sight crystal in front of his eye one last time—only to see a long, dark landmass in the distance in front of them. There were no lights or structures that he could see, but it was definitely a beach with a thick tree line. Even though he hated himself for it, he kissed the bone charm hanging from the chain around his neck in gratitude.

“Eily, it’s land!”

Eily turned from the sail and rushed forward. “Where?”

“If we keep the sail at that angle and paddle, we should hit it.”

“I think I see it. There could be a reef . . .”

“Do you have a better suggestion?”

Eily sighed. “No. Kiss that charm again for me.”

They picked up the oars and began to paddle. The sound of the waterspout continued to make Zale’s head pound. It was getting too close. It was as though the spout was actually chasing them.

The two Gelfling stared straight ahead at the land as though they were hypnotized. Zale couldn’t even feel the ache in his arms as they rowed; adrenaline coursed through him like liquid lightning. As they began to see the details of the shoreline, he heard a scraping sound beneath the boat. A crack formed within the splintering wood as the reef began to poke through. It made his heart stop for a moment and his mouth go dry with fear.

“We’re hitting the reef,” Eily shouted. “Help me, Zale. We need to push off somehow, or we’ll have to swim for shore.”

The waterspout got closer until Zale could see the bits of flotsam swirling within it. He turned and looked into Eily's eyes and became acutely aware of her fear. He could smell it permeating the salt-saturated air. She was obviously thinking they were going to drown. He vowed in silence that he wouldn't let that happen. Even if it meant that he wouldn't make it, Eily would reach the shore.

Before she could stop him, Zale jumped out of the boat, pushing his feet against the coral and shoving with all of his might. He ignored the pain as some of the coral poked through his shoes and cut the bottom of his feet. There was another horrible scraping and groaning sound, and the boat became dislodged.

Eily grabbed Zale by his coat, pulling him aboard.

She shook her head in disbelief and shouted, "What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't. Help me paddle." Water was pouring through the crack. Zale frantically stuffed his sack of supplies into the hole and shoved his extra shirts into the smaller leaks around it.

He heard Eily groan, "We'll never make it."

"We're almost there. Keep paddling—and whatever you do, don't look behind you."

As Zale said it, he disobeyed his own advice and turned to look. The funnel was so close that he could actually see the water being pulled in. He saw fish struggling to swim away, jumping out of the water only to be sucked inside and spin in confused chaos. The waterspout was so wide that his sailboat would be just another piece of driftwood to be washed out to sea. He suddenly felt that he could paddle much faster, and his limbs soon caught up with his mind. He didn't stop until their hull scraped the sand of the beach.

"We made it. Look," said Eily.

Zale turned and faced the sky just in time to see the swirling clouds dissipate like a nightmare from a waking dreamer.

"It's that charm of yours. It gets us out of more tight places—"

"That wasn't luck, Eily, just some fast thinking and faster paddling."

"Sorry, Zale, but finding an island just in time was luck. I wish *my* totem was lucky."

“I’ll trade with you. Besides, how lucky can it be? We lost sight of land during a storm, were nearly killed by a waterspout, the ship is damaged, and we have nothing to show for it.”

“I’m just grateful to be alive. Besides, we do have something to show for it. You found your island. It’s something we can mark on the map once these clouds clear out and we can see the constellations again.”

Zale grunted slightly and nodded, then sank in sudden exhaustion on the land. He ran his tan hands through his hair and readjusted the rag that he wore to keep it from his face. Then he leaned back on the cool, damp sand. Eily dropped to her knees, and they stared quietly at the sky, both intending to wait out the rest of the storm. However, nature seemed to have other plans.

Glowing purple balls of lightning drifted around the clouds, and Zale saw a few more bubbling to the surface of the water and rising up to meet them. He cringed, thinking of the fish caught in the electric tendrils of light. He had been in danger of meeting the same fate when he’d jumped overboard to dislodge the ship, but at the time it hadn’t seemed important. He glanced at Eily, realizing that if they didn’t leave the beach soon, the ball lightning could still be a problem.

Good-luck charm or not, being killed by a ball of lightning would mean I had the worst luck in the world. Thra doesn’t hate me that much. It was beginning to rain again, but this time he felt large chunks of ice mixed in within it, hitting him in the face. Then again, I could be wrong.

Zale groaned and sat up, stretching and muttering. “I guess we’d better find some shelter for the night.”

“You’re right. But, I wish we could stay on the beach. That foliage doesn’t look very friendly.”

Zale scanned the jungle. There were tangle vines and clam-mouthed pods, predatory plants that would trap their prey and digest it quickly to fertilize the soil. The vines would’ve been easy to see in the daylight because of their orange coloration, but it was getting dark. He could already tell that the island had an abundance of dangerous plants, which made him wonder about the wildlife as well.

“Help me pull *The Seastrider* up. We don’t want her to get swept away.”

Eily silently complied until the boat was beached almost entirely into the tree line. The rain stopped, but now hail was pelting them. It was starting to sting, and Zale noticed that the balls of ice were big, the size of screech eggs.

Zale sighed, “Well, at least the hail won’t hit us as hard with that canopy to soften the blow. We need to look for wood to repair the ship, anyway.”

“Let’s try to find some dry wood for a fire first. I feel like I’m never going to get dry.”

Zale groaned and murmured “Don’t remind me” as he walked into the thick foliage, carefully avoiding the vines dangling from the overhanging branches.

Even though the forest was dense, there was a thin path carved through the thicket. Clearly, it was a path made by only one person, and it hadn’t been used for a very long time. Thick creeper thorns were starting to encroach on the path, and Zale kept jumping in surprise, thinking that someone had grabbed him whenever his coat would get caught on one. He was reminded of how out of place he was in the forest. He was used to the sea spray, and the large cliffs and plateaus around his village. Zale glanced at Eily, wondering if she was thinking the same thing, but then he remembered her parents often scolded her for wandering into the jungle on the outskirts of the settlement when she was little. In the forest she was more comfortable. As he watched, she demonstrated the fact by carefully pushing a vine out of her path with a stick.

“Eily, can you take the lead?”

She helped him pull the creeper thorns off of his coat, “I was hoping you would ask. The foliage isn’t friendly, but there are ways to tell where it’s growing.”

The clam-mouthed pods were harder to spot. They seemed to be surrounded by higher shrubs and their brown, green, and blue camouflage blended in with the forest floor. Zale and Eily both knew that if they accidentally stepped on one, the long, needle-sharp leaves would come together and easily sever a foot. Even the small pods were dangerous, but Zale spotted one that was easily big enough to swallow him whole. He cringed and skirted carefully around it. It made him even more grateful that Eily was leading the way.

Eily whispered, "I think there's a house up ahead."

Zale nodded and raised a finger to his lips. Even though the thicket was blocking his view, he could just barely see what looked like a dilapidated house blending in with the trees, making it look as though it belonged to the forest.

Or hiding within the forest, Zale thought. This could be a criminal's house, belonging to one of the anarchists that the Skeksis are always leaving posters about. I should be afraid, but why do I feel like I've been here before?

The house was definitely designed by a Gelfling, probably of the Wealding clan. It wasn't domed shaped like the houses of his Sifa clan. They were built into thick rock faces or crafted out of stone to withstand the storms that swept across the ocean. The walls were made of wood that was carved to fit together, and the roof was a steeple. Vines crept up the sides, and large holes dotted the wood as though something had broken into it. As he got closer, he could make out creatures skittering around the inside of the house. It hadn't been abandoned for long, though. The sleek chimney still had soot marks around the edges.

Eily whispered, "I don't think anyone lives here anymore. Do you think we should sleep inside? I think enough of the roof is left to at least keep us dry."

The hail was starting to tear through the canopy. Even though Zale didn't like the look of the house, it would keep them safe and dry.

"It's worth looking into. Just be careful. I'll go first."

Zale crept slowly up to the door, which hung off of its hinges slightly, as if it had been knocked in. He pressed his ear against it to listen, for a whisper or a voice, but the door gave way and fell with a loud crash. Before Zale could move out of the way, something brushed sharply up against his face, inches away from his eye.

Chapter Three

Luck

Zale screamed and ducked out of the way as a large, black bird pecked a shallow cut on his cheek and then flew past him.

“YAH!”

Eily laughed nervously. “It’s just a screecrow.”

The screecrow clambered above the canopy, croaking and screeching as it went. There was something about the bird that Zale didn’t like. Its feathers were thin and oily, and it seemed to tumble through the air rather than fly. Also, even though it was only for an instant, he saw that the dull, black marble eyes of the bird had a violet sheen to them. It made him shiver. The creature’s body was covered in furry lumps that reminded Zale of how a trapperleng spider carried its young on its back. Instinctively, Zale felt his hand wrap around his talisman. Suddenly, the chill he felt didn’t seem like a result of the rain.

“You okay, Zale? I’ve never seen you this shaken up.”

“I didn’t like that screecrow. Something about it didn’t seem *natural*. It seemed to be dead, but it was moving. It makes me think this could be a mistake . . .”

“I never thought a bad omen would stop you.”

“It won’t. Let’s just get in before we get beaten to death by this hail.”

Zale paused the moment he entered the dark room. He lifted his head and breathed deeply through his nose, testing the musty air. It smelled like decay and mildew, but there was another odor lingering as well. All places had smells and feelings associated with them. This one was so faint that only a Gelfling could place it—*fear*. It was a fading scent, but it was like a

stain on the wall that would never wipe away. It was the smell of sweat, heart-pounding terror, and an overwhelming desire for nothing more than survival and the will to not be seen. Zale glanced at Eily, who was already edging back toward the doorway. She sensed it as well.

Zale closed his eyes then opened them slowly, trying to get them adjusted to the darkness within the room. He could just barely make out the broken furniture littering the floor like the bones of memories. There were remains of a chair and table shattered on the ground in front of him. The simple wooden writing desk in the corner hardly looked recognizable, as though every inch of it had been thoroughly damaged. Hanging on the wall above the remains of the desk was what looked like a parchment held in place by a fine dagger. Even though the paper was yellowed from exposure to the elements, it wasn't very old. Zale frowned at the dagger. There were red gemstones fitted into the hilt. If someone had robbed the house or was looking for something valuable, then the dagger would've been one of the first things taken.

"Don't go in any further, Zale. I don't think we should be here."

"I just want to read the note. Besides, the hail hasn't stopped yet, and we don't have anywhere else to go."

Zale walked over to the dagger and ripped the letter free. Even though the ink was slightly faded, he could still read it clearly.

"The Gelfling Hagan is hereby accused of treason for slandering the good name of our Emperor, skekSo the Glorious, and attempting to incite anarchistic riots against the benevolent rulers of this land. He is dangerous and is rumored to be working with the malicious Mystics against his own kind. Those seen associating with this degenerate shall be taken to the Castle of the Crystal for trial. Those who are willing to divulge the convict's whereabouts shall be treated with leniency. This is your one warning. SkekSil the Chamberlain."

Eily's eyes were wide as Zale finished reading the parchment. "We need to leave here now. Just by being in this house, we could be accused of association with a criminal. This must've been his hideout. You were right—that screecrow was a bad sign."

"They were looking for something here, something besides that Gelfling. Since they left a threatening note, they clearly never found him or it."

“Then all the more reason we should leave.”

“We don’t have anywhere else to go. The roof is mostly intact, and there’s even a fireplace. We can make a fire out of those broken chairs and get dry, and then we’ll start repairing the ship in the morning. We’ll be out of this place before anyone can accuse us of anything.”

Eily scowled. “Your advice would seem practical, except for the fact that I’ve seen that look on your face before. You don’t want to leave this place, because you want to find what they were looking for, and I won’t be a part of it.”

“Then don’t be. You just said what I suggested was a good plan. I’ll look for whatever Hagan was hiding, and you can get the fire started.”

Eily sighed and began to rummage through the broken furniture, tossing pieces of the chairs into the fireplace and using some leaves that had fallen through the holes in the roof as kindling. She set the long planks from the table to the side. Zale nodded with approval. They were good pieces of wood that might be enough to patch the hole.

Zale scoured the other rooms looking for anything unusual. The bed was stained and mildewed, and the mattress had been thrown aside and ripped apart. Clearly the Skeksis had already checked to see if what they were searching for was hidden there. He looked for loose boards beneath it, but everything seemed solid. The Wealding clan knew how to build their houses sturdy. Though the roof had fallen into a state of decay, the floorboards didn’t even creak. He poked at knots in the wood, searched every piece of furniture that was mostly intact, even the ruins of the furniture littering the home, but there seemed to be nothing of any value left.

Zale didn’t know why, but he knew that he wasn’t going to find anything in the other rooms. What he was looking for was somewhere in the main room. He could feel it. It had something to do with the writing desk, with some sort of book. Images were flashing through his head, images of a Gelfling frantically writing something down, and he realized they were images he once saw during a fading dream.

Zale rubbed his temples and closed his eyes in thought. *The reason that I feel like I’ve been in this cabin before is because I dreamed of it, but why? I’ve heard of prophets dreaming about significant events, but I’m no prophet. Is something important hidden here that I’m meant to find?*

His head hurt as he tried to recall more details, but all he could remember was a book and something about the fireplace. Zale opened his eyes and glanced at the stone hearth in front of him. Eily was eyeing him from in front of the now-lit fireplace but didn't say a word. She didn't have to speak for Zale to feel her irritation.

"Why did you even bother coming with me?" asked Zale. "Clearly you think I'm not smart enough to keep us safe."

Eily rolled her eyes and continued poking at the fire. "I came because I'm your friend and I wanted to help you."

"There was more to it than that. You said that you didn't want to be a fisher for a living. We finally have a chance to find something valuable, and you won't even help me look."

Eily stood up and shouted, "And make an enemy of the Skeksis? Are you insane or just a fool?"

Zale flinched and turned away from her, pretending to be interested in the pieces of wood that were on the floor. It was very rare when Eily would raise her voice, and it made her words sting even more.

Eily looked away. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean it like the others. I don't think you're a fool."

Zale dusted his hands off and chuckled. "Just insane?"

Eily flashed him a wry smile. "Maybe a little, but you're right. I thought that since you have such unnatural luck that maybe we might find something important, and maybe I wouldn't have to settle down just yet."

Zale frowned. "Settle down?"

"That's what Da and I were arguing about. He said that I get into too much trouble with you."

He grinned. "Well, we do get into a lot of trouble. Let's leave that waterspout out of the story when we tell your parents about the island."

She smiled, but then sighed and began doodling intricate circular patterns in the ashes before the fireplace with one of the pieces of wood. Even though neither Gelfing knew what the patterns meant, for some reason they seemed to comfort Eily when she was upset. Zale watched in fascination and then knelt next to her, adding to one of the designs and waiting for her to continue.

"He said I'm getting too old for to be sailing off into the setting suns, and that I need to start thinking about my future. He was talking about

raising my own family. I do want little ones one day, but I don't think I'm ready yet."

Zale slumped against the hearth next to her. "I guess we are old enough to think about that sort of thing. But I have a feeling that I'll be sailing for a long time before anyone will even consider settling down with me."

Eily shrugged. "You might be surprised. If you tell a potential mate that you discovered an island, it might impress her more than you think."

"I don't have anyone in particular in mind. I'm not even going to look for someone until I've made a better name for myself."

"At least you can keep sailing. It seems that my only two choices are settling down or following in my father's footsteps. I definitely don't want to be a fisher for a living, and there's no one in the village that I'm interested in, either."

"I think I understand now. So, you came with me, hoping this would be a valuable island, and that you could prepare islands for new settlements instead."

Eily nodded. "That's why I want to switch charms with you. I don't have good luck. This island won't work, since it's full of dangerous plants and it used to be the home of a criminal."

"I'm sorry, Eily."

She shrugged and continued to draw.

Zale sighed. "I wish I could control this charm, and then maybe I could help you. If I could only choose when I have good luck . . ."

"Maybe Thra knows when you're going to need your luck better than you do."

"That could be. But she sure didn't know what was good for me *that* day, did she?"

Eily sighed and turned back to the fire. "I guess not."

Zale stood up and began to pace. "Relying on my luck is what got me into that mess. Besides, luck doesn't replenish itself. One day, mine is going to run out. I need to learn not to depend on it."

"At least your charm is useful. My medallion helps me find animals. For someone who doesn't want to be a fisher or a hunter, it's worthless."

"It's not a bad profession."

Eily poked at the fire with the edge of the wood, sending a shower of sparks into the air. “Unless you’re someone who doesn’t like to hurt animals.”

Zale shrugged. “They always say that you should be satisfied with what you’re given, but I’ve never believed that. That’s why I wanted to be the one to carve the charms. Then, I could give you a new one, and one to anyone else who isn’t satisfied with what fate has planned for them.”

“It might be for the best, Zale. I hear it’s a tough discipline to master. Besides, it’s very rare for a man to be chosen to become a ritual keeper.”

“It doesn’t matter now. The matriarch’s daughter told me that she will never take me as an apprentice. I guess I’d better get used to the fact that I’ll be without a talisman for the rest of my life.”

Eily frowned. “What do you mean?”

Zale sighed and stared at the fire, avoiding Eily’s gaze. He wished he hadn’t said anything.

“I’ve never told anyone this, but my charm cracks every time something very lucky happens to me. It cracked a little after we reached the island.”

Eily became pale. “You mean it really was just luck that we got here alive?”

Zale sighed miserably and nodded.

“So, when your luck runs out, you’ll lose your talisman?”

“Yes. I’ll be the only Gelfling of the Sifa clan without a charm. This one has been in my family for years. It can’t have much luck left in it, and the ritual keeper made it very clear she won’t ever carve another one for me.”

“I’m sorry, Zale. Maybe you’re right. Maybe that talisman isn’t lucky.”

“Or maybe you’re right, and I’m just a fool.”

Zale stopped pacing and punched the stone hearth in frustration, staring at the fire. Suddenly, he realized that there was a slight breeze blowing the flames inward. Air was flowing from beneath the stone backing.

“Eily, help me put out the fire. There’s a hollow place behind that stone.”

Eily squinted against the light of the fire. “I see. How strange . . .”

They kicked dirt over the fire and then tried to shove the large flat stone backing to the side. Zale had to rely on Eily's help to push it completely away. It surprised him to think that Hagan could be strong enough to move the rock by himself, but if the Skeksis considered him dangerous, it made sense.

"It's a passageway," Eily said.

Zale couldn't see far within the small tunnel entrance, because the fire spoiled his dark vision. But an image flashed in his mind of a thick tome waiting for him somewhere within. A chill ran down his spine. He lit his oil lamp, crouched down, and entered the tunnel.

From behind him, he heard Eily yell, "Be careful. It could be some sort of trap."

Zale grunted in agreement. As he crawled along, he realized that he wasn't watching where he was going at all. The lamplight shining warmly on the earthen walls made him feel almost at home, and even though the cabin reeked of fear, the tunnel was saturated with the warm scent of hope. Hagan had escaped. Zale lifted the lamp and felt his heart thundering as he saw the pile of objects in front of him. There was a tattered journal bound with Nebrie leather, a suit of Black River beetle armor, and a sword made from the same strong chitin. It was the armor and weaponry of a soldier of the Castle of the Crystal. He noticed that behind it the passageway widened and appeared to lead out into the woods behind the cabin.

When Zale came out, Eily said breathlessly, "Luck?"

Zale glanced at his necklace with a bewildered expression on his face. The bone carving of Thra had a thin crack down the center. The precious stones along the sides that represented her suns and moons were also starting to fracture on the inside. His charm was so familiar and sometimes he even resented it, but yet again he couldn't help but be mystified by its power. He pulled out the journal, the armor, and—even though he hated to even touch such a dangerous weapon—the sword, as well. The blade was heavily nicked, as though it had been used often. He pushed the sword to the side, disgusted by the smell of death on it, and instead focused on the armored suit.

Zale whispered, "He was a soldier from the Castle of the Crystal. Only they get to wear this kind of armor. Look, that's the symbol of the crystal carved into the front of the breastplate. He must've left it behind so

the weight of it wouldn't slow him down. Plus, I doubt the Skeksis can tell one Gelfling from another very easily—but they would know this armor.”

Zale marveled at the thick, blackish-blue shell, rubbing his hand along the smooth surface of it wistfully. He had never seen such beautiful craftsmanship. Even if Hagan had abandoned his post as a guard for the Skeksis, he clearly polished the armor to a shine even before he hid it, a habit probably created by his training.

Eily stared in amazement, rubbing her hand along the carving of the crystal, whispering in an almost reverent voice, “Maybe that was what they were looking for.”

“I doubt it. It was clever of him to hide it in that tunnel. Even if the Skeksis had figured out how to open it, they would be too big to get through. I don't think they found the tunnel at all, though. I think he ducked into it before they could break down the door.”

Eily frowned. “How do you know?”

Zale quickly glanced away from Eily and started trying to relight the fire. “Well, I felt relieved when I crawled in, and it made me feel like he must've escaped.”

Eily glanced around the room. “I just don't understand why they would bother breaking all of the furniture rather than searching for him.”

“My guess is they were after something in the journal. That's why they destroyed the writing desk.”

Eily looked suspiciously at the journal then moved slightly away from it as though to inspect the ornate breastplate. “This armor is worth a lot in trade. Coming here might have been worth it, if nothing more than for the river beetle shell. We can't just trade it back to the Skeksis, though. They would know we found the journal.”

“But we can disassemble it and barter with the pieces. If it were patched together in a different way, it could be used on a boat. It could even be temporarily used to patch up our ship and get us on our way.”

Eily nodded. “That's true. There are some nails that attached the chairs together. We could probably reuse them to patch up the damage. But it's going to take a few days, if nothing more than to drill holes in that armor to put the nails through. I really don't like staying here any longer than we have to.”

Zale flipped through the journal. “Well, it’ll give us some reading time.”

“No, thank you. I’d rather concentrate on repairing the boat.”

Zale shrugged. “Suit yourself. Knowledge is pretty valuable too, you know.”

Eily whispered under her breath, “And dangerous.”

Chapter Four

Isla Hagan

For two days they gathered materials for fixing the ship and searched for anything to eat other than more turblaroots. Zale tried to help Eily with the ship repairs, but all he could think about were the contents of the journal. Every night while Eily slept, Zale read more and more of the book. The story was becoming very disturbing. Through Hagan's words, Zale now knew that everything the Skeksis told them was a lie. He knew how skekTek, the Skeksis scientist, was experimenting on live Gelfling. Somehow, skekTek drained them of their vitality, almost their very souls, and from it created a shining blue liquid for the emperor to drink to keep him young and strong.

Zale read the last entry, unable to stop:

The darkened crystal hangs above a shaft of air and fire in the center of the castle. I never knew why the scientist made an opening into the crystal chasm in the wall of his lab or why he affixed a reflector to the opposite side of the shaft. Now, I know that the reason was to beam the reflection of the crystal above into the eyes of a test subject. Seeing the reflection of the Dark Crystal's light drains the victim's essence away. It was how they made the Podlings into mindless slaves.

Even though I tried to hide what I knew from the Skeksis, the scientist suspected me. I think it was because I tried to avoid eye contact with him whenever I saw him coming. I couldn't get the image of that poor Gelfling girl out of my mind, and I still

can't. She was so young and innocent, pleading with the scientist, and he just stared at her with that cold, lifeless eye. She couldn't have been a rebel. The worst that she could be accused of would be forgetting to do one of her chores.

She was one of my own clan, and I didn't even try to stop him. I was there and I just sat there frozen, watching. I'm a disgrace and don't deserve to be called Gelfling. The Podlings suffered for so long, and I ignored their plight, too, thinking of them as lesser beings. How did I let the Skeksis change my very way of thinking? Why did I let them teach me how to be cruel and violent like them?

If the Skeksis do the same thing to me before I can escape, I'll deserve every bit of it, but I have to somehow tell the others. I can't risk waiting one more day. I'm going to attempt to run away tonight. If I get caught before I can get this journal to one of the elders, it's up to whoever reads it to tell them the truth. It's a burden that no one should have to bear but me, since I was the fool who turned a blind eye to what the Skeksis were doing, and the implications of it in the first place.

The next day, even though he was trying to assist Eily, Zale just couldn't concentrate. The burden of the journal was on him now, and it weighed heavily on his thoughts. All he could think of was Hagan and the journal. *Where are you now, Hagan? You escaped the Skeksis. I'd gladly give the journal back to you, if I could just figure out how to find you . . .*

Eily secured another piece of wood and part of the beetle shell to *The Seastrider* and said, "I'm sure this will be our last day on the island. There won't be a better day than this one."

Zale grumbled something that he hoped sounded like agreement, trying to match Eily's excited tone. Even though sailing was one of the things that he enjoyed the most in life, he couldn't even think about sailing in his ship again. It felt so unimportant in comparison to what he knew now. Eily's voice suddenly seemed very far away.

If the emperor was eating Gelfling it would be less disgusting than this, Zale thought. He isn't just stealing their lives. He's stealing their thoughts and memories, and leaving them nothing but empty husks, slaves.

Zale wanted desperately to take the journal out of his pack and throw it into the sea to forget what he read, but he knew that he couldn't. If he destroyed the journal, the truth would be lost with it.

He sighed miserably. Eily was right. I should've never read it. It was dangerous to find this, but I can't just ignore it now. But, what chance do I have against the Skeksis? None. Well, at least none alone. Hagan ran from place to place, and they finally found where he was hiding. But then, he never made any allies.

Eily threw a small pebble at him. "Zale, can you please pay attention for one moment and hand me some of the nails?"

"I'm sorry. It's just that I understand why the Skeksis are looking for the journal *now*. It's horrible. Their scientist is experimenting on live Gelfling—"

"I don't have time to read it right now. One of us has to concentrate on getting off of this island. Our families have probably given up on us coming back, and they could be preparing stone gardens in our memory as we speak."

Zale took out the journal, stood up, and offered it to Eily. "Then let me take over on the repairs for a little while. You need to read this. It concerns you, too. It concerns all of us."

Eily flinched away from it, as though Zale was offering her something unpleasant to eat. "Don't you think we're in this over our heads? No one is going to listen to you and me anyway, but the Skeksis don't know that. If they found out that we read the journal, and if what you're saying is true, then we'll be the next experiments. Think about *that*."

Zale reluctantly put the journal down and handed some nails to Eily, helping her shove them through the holes in the armor to make sure they fit securely. It would have been helpful if they had some sort of tar, but the sap of the banding tree that they'd collected earlier in the day would have to work. The trees were very pliable and could whip around during harsh storms instead of snapping in half, and their sap was thick and sticky. The trip home would take only one day, but no one had ever tried to use thick

sap in place of tar on a ship before. Zale glanced at his good-luck charm and frowned. They would surely have to rely on it again to get them home.

Eily smeared some sap on the side of the ship and turned to face Zale. “I hate to encourage you, but my father said that the elders are in a council at Claw Mountain right now. You could give the journal to your father so that he could take it to them. He’s respected in the village, so he could get them to listen.”

“You’re right. They won’t take my word, but they may take his. Do you think that they might be having a council because of”—Zale motioned at the journal—“rumors about this?”

Eily shook her head. “I doubt it. I wouldn’t get too excited about the outcome, either. The tribes are so diverse it’s hard to even get them to even make a simple decision, much less an important one like what to do about that journal.”

“Either way, I feel better already. We can get rid of this journal and everything goes back to normal.” Eily looked up from the stubborn piece of armor that she was nailing into the side of the ship and muttered, “You could get rid of it now. I still think that we would be better off if you had tossed that book into the fire the night that you found it.”

• • •

They worked for the rest of the day in silence. At least it got Zale’s mind off of the horrible things written within the journal, and with the two of them working together they were able to finish before the sun set. Zale stared at the sky. It was cloudless. All the moons were visible, and the constellations were beginning to sparkle above the setting triple suns, a map in the sky that would lead them home.

Eily pointed to the most prominent constellation and said, “Judging from Aughra’s position, I’d say that if we sail northeast for the rest of the night, we should arrive at the port just before sunrise. Hopefully, your father will light the way.”

“Doesn’t he always?”

“Yes, but that won’t help us with the reef around this island.”

Zale peered toward the reef. “The water is pretty clear here. The dark clouds that night made it hard to see. Those moons should provide enough

light that we shouldn't get hung up again."

"That's true, and even if we do get hung up, we'll be close enough to paddle back. Are you ready to go now? I think we have plenty of supplies, and the weather couldn't be better."

Zale began to rummage through his belongings until he found the watertight map case. "Almost. Now that we can see the sky, I think we need to name the island we discovered."

"I hate to say it, but we didn't exactly discover it. Didn't Hagan discover it first?"

"I guess you're right. I would say that his opinion doesn't matter since he's a *dangerous criminal*, but now that I've read the journal, I'm one as well. Say good-bye to Isla Hagan."

Zale took out the piece of writing charcoal and drew a rough sketch of an island on the map at their location, careful to take note of the position of the stars to figure out the approximate distance from the Sifa coastal village.

Eily chuckled. "Typically, it's wise to travel the entire length of an island before you mark it."

Zale shrugged. "Well, we'll come back and explore the rest of the island later. I think getting home is more important for now."

"For once I can't agree with you more. Good riddance to Isla Hagan. Let's go."

Chapter Five

Homecoming

Zale jostled the boat until he was sure that it was watertight. Then, after using the oar to dislodge it from the shallows, he waved at the island as though he was saying good-bye to a long-lost friend. Even Eily chuckled and pretended to wave as it began to sink into the distance. The calm and peaceful night made the ordeal of a few days ago seem as though it never happened at all. The still water glinted silver in the light of the moons, their reflections creating pools of blue, white, and purple light in the water. They could easily see the dark shadow of the reef around the island and were able to avoid it.

They sailed in silence, taking turns resting and steering. Zale couldn't sleep. His mind kept wandering back to the journal. Exhausted from working so hard, he wouldn't let himself relax. Whenever his eyes closed, he imagined the Skeksis scientist described in the journal, draining the life out of a Gelfling the way someone might drain juice from a sifang orange.

Eily sighed. "Zale, you need to get some sleep. You didn't sleep well on the island, and I don't want you drifting off when it's your turn to steer. The last thing we need is to sail off course."

"I know. I just haven't had this much trouble resting since I was a child and thought the Mystics were going to steal me out of my bed to eat me."

Eily didn't say anything. Zale knew she was fighting the urge to tell him that she told him not to read the journal in the first place.

He was grateful for her restraint. "I'll try to rest, but it shouldn't be long now anyway. I think in a few more hours we'll have reached the

shore.”

Zale closed his eyes and faded off.

• • •

When he opened his eyes again he found himself strapped into a cold, metal chair and staring into the face of his worst nightmare.

The Skeksis glared at him with a strange contraption magnifying its one red, lizardlike eye. Its stare was cold, emotionless, and empty. Zale was nothing to that detached eye but a test subject. The Skeksis’s other eye was pure white like a glass marble, and Zale shivered when he saw it. Even though the eye was clearly blind, it seemed to penetrate into his very soul. He stared in awe at the creature’s face. He thought it was smiling in interest at him, but the long teeth within its beaked mouth made the expression look more like a sneer.

The Skeksis was covered from head to foot in layer upon layer of off-white clothing with the spine of some sort of poor creature as an ornament on its hunched back. Its long arms seemed almost too long, and they sported gnarled claws, looking like the branches of a dead tree. High up on its shoulders, Zale could see another set of arms that were small, almost infantile, withered from lack of use.

Zale’s arms were tied down so firmly that no matter how hard he struggled, the restraints seemed to get tighter and he felt his joints groaning under the pressure he put on them. There was an opening in the stone wall in front of him, revealing the crystal chasm and the reflector, just as Hagan had described. Pinkish violet light spilled out in his direction.

The Skeksis noticed the talisman around his neck and paused for a moment. “Interesting. It’s one of those charms that your clan is known for possessing. I’ve always been curious about them, though this one seems to be broken.”

Zale looked down at the mangled charm. *Gone forever. My luck has finally run out, and for what? I failed.*

He glanced around the room. Then he saw Eily. Her skin looked pale and lifeless. Her eyes were a dull shade of gray, but the pupils reflected a strange purple light. She looked shriveled, like an empty husk left by a

dead insect, a mindless husk that would do the bidding of the Skeksis without question.

“What have you done to her? Eily, wake up!”

“Not to worry, you’re going to see firsthand. Look into the reflection of the Dark Crystal. Stare into its void and let it claim your mind.”

Zale tried his best to look away as the Skeksis pulled a lever on the wall, adjusting the reflective surface to beam the light of the crystal into his eyes. As the purple light hit his eyelids he found that he couldn’t resist the urge to open them. He tried to remember why he was even bothering to fight it. Why was he here? He needed to do something and it was very important, but all he could think of was the warmth of that light and the power coursing through his body, taking his problems away along with every thought he possessed. But then, everything was going black and terrifying darkness was replacing his very soul. He tried to scream, but no sound would come out. . . .

. . .

Eily shook Zale out of his dream. “*Zale!* Thank goodness. You were screaming and I couldn’t wake you up. I thought . . . well, I thought something was really wrong.”

Zale glanced around the boat and saw the journal at Eily’s feet, upside down with a lit oil lamp next to it. He stared at Eily in disbelief for a moment, realizing she must’ve been reading it, but he could tell from the feeling of tension in the air that something else was wrong. Zale shielded his eyes from the light of her lamp and thought that he could just see land in the distance. The shoreline was dangerously dark.

Zale shivered, pulling the woolen blanket around his arms. “What’s wrong?”

Eily took a deep breath. Her expression was as though she was attending a stone garden ceremony. “We’re getting close to the port, but I don’t see any light from the lighthouse.”

Zale stood up and the boat rocked dangerously. “What? That’s not possible. Father would never abandon the lighthouse. Why didn’t you wake me sooner?”

“I didn’t realize how close I was.” Eily glanced at the book with a nauseous look on her face. “I was distracted and thought I might’ve veered off course.”

Zale rushed to the front of the ship and peered through the sight crystal. In the light of the moons he could see the outline of the lighthouse, but he had never seen it look so dark. It was always a bright beacon of hope in the night, like a torch in a pitch-black cave, but now it looked more like a long-forgotten monument. It was as gray as the rocks it was meant to protect against. Zale didn’t even realize that he was shaking until the seeing crystal tumbled from his hand onto the deck.

Eily put a hand on his shoulder and steadied him. “Well, there’s nothing we can do from here. I need your help. I’m having trouble seeing the reef, but you know this shoreline better than most sailors I know.”

“I can get us through it.”

Glancing over the side of the boat, he began guiding Eily. Even though it was very hard, he could see the dim outline of rocks in the water. He knew from experience how to line up the rocks and corals with landmarks on the beach. Zale called out to Eily, telling her which way to steer, and pointing out the houses to use as a reference point. The largest of the domed houses were crafted from marble and belonged to the wealthiest fishing Gelfling of the village. They liked to see the coral glistening beneath the water on bright, clear days. It was where the fish lived. They told him it was like watching their own prosperity shimmering and shining.

Once someone spent enough time in the village they knew which spots were the most dangerous, but the lighthouse was crucial to sailors without that knowledge. Even though Zale knew which spots to avoid, it was still difficult to see and even more difficult to concentrate. Every so often he would feel the hull scratching something sharp, and he would hold his breath. They were close to shore, but not close enough to swim for it.

He thought, *If I have any luck left at all, just let me get there in time. Please, Mother Thra, guide me home in time to help.*

Eily seemed to guess his thoughts. “We don’t know for sure that anything is wrong.”

“If Father let the light die, then something is very wrong.”

The moment the ship touched the dock, Zale raced in the direction of the lighthouse. Eily called out to him, but Zale couldn't hear what she was saying over the pounding of his heart. He ran so recklessly that he stumbled and slipped twice on the smooth seashells that acted as cobblestones on the road. A few people were still awake and some even called out to him as he passed, but their features were blurry like the phantoms of a dream. He didn't even realize he was crying, but he felt the tears sliding down his face. The lighthouse was up ahead, becoming more prominent in the light of the moons the closer he got. He felt as if at any moment his legs would turn to lead and he wouldn't be able to reach it, that he would wake up on the boat, startled and relieved. However, when he reached the door to the attached house, the fear became all too real.

The door hung from its hinges like the door of Hagan's cabin. Stuck into the wooden frame of the door by a kitchen knife was a note written in the ornate script of the Skeksis.

"The Gelfling Aarek is accused of association with a dangerous anarchistic criminal and has been taken to the Castle of the Crystal for questioning. Those who know the whereabouts of his son, the Gelfling Zale, will be rewarded for bringing this information forward. If Zale comes to the Castle of the Crystal before Aarek's trial and returns all Skeksis property, the Gelfling Aarek shall be released. If not, he shall await his sentence with the rest of those associated with this criminal."

Once again, the note was signed by skekSil the Chamberlain. Zale rushed into the house and called for his father, but he knew he was too late. There were signs of a struggle. The writing desk was turned inside out and several pieces of furniture were broken and scattered around the room. Zale knew why. Even though his father respected the Skeksis and would have cooperated with them under normal circumstances, he also would have wanted to add fuel to the flare on top of the lighthouse before he left. Clearly, the Skeksis weren't willing to wait that long.

He leaned against the door, unable to fathom what had happened until he heard Eily speaking to him in a cold, furious whisper, "They took my family, too—my mother, my father, and even my baby sister, all because they knew that I'm a friend of yours."

Zale looked up with a pained expression.

Eily wept and crinkled up the piece of parchment in her hand. “Zale, sometimes you can be so selfish. . . .”

Zale wept and yanked the note from his door, crinkling it up into a ball as well. “Then come with me. If they want me to go to the Castle so badly, who am I to deny them?”

Eily frowned. “You want to go to the castle? But everything in the journal must be true for them to hunt down our families to get it back. Do you know what they’ll do to you?”

“Yes. And I don’t care. But this has to get to the elders.” Zale pulled the journal from his sack of supplies and muttered, “I’ll leave this curse with them, but we’ll get our families back, one way or another.”

Eily nodded and whispered, “We have to. But, how did they even know that you had the journal?”

Zale shivered, remembering the cold, dead eyes of the bird that attacked him when he entered the cabin. “The screecrow. I knew that there was something wrong with it. There were furry lumps all over its body. Those had to be spyeyes.”

Eily became pale. “So they could see us. They could tell we were from the Sifa clan, and they had enough time to send someone here while we were repairing the ship.”

Zale kicked the door, making it fall down with a satisfying crash. “And they took our loved ones to make sure we would come for them and bring the journal before anyone else could see it.”

Eily stammered, “We could give it back—”

Zale held up his hand and turned abruptly as he heard something rustling somewhere within his home. In a flash, a small red lizard with gossamer wings zipped by his head, rushing toward the doorway. Its back looked as though it was covered in furry black lumps, like a mane running from its neck to its tail.

He gasped. “A drakolye covered in spyeyes!”

Both of them reached out, trying to grab the lizard before it could escape, but it was too late. It easily soared out of their reach and then flew as fast as it could in the direction of the woods. Eily looked as though she was ready to rush after it, but Zale put a hand on her shoulder and shook his head. It was too far away to catch. They watched in silence until it was a speck in the distance.

Eily leaned against the doorframe. “We’ve already failed. Now that they know we’re taking the journal to the council, they’ll kill our families. We have to go straight to the castle and bring that journal back.”

Zale shook his head. “No. If we bring it straight to them there’s no guarantee they’ll let our families go. We have to go to the elders and ask for help.”

Eily snapped, “The Skeksis know we’re back now. They’ll probably send someone to hunt us down to get it back anyway. We’ll never make it in time, and we can’t risk leading them to the elders. Maybe if we go straight to the castle to return the journal they’ll be lenient.”

“Do you think our parents would want us to let the Skeksis get away with something that horrible?”

Eily looked at the ground. “No, but Sherilie was only one cycle old.”

Zale felt tears forming in his eyes as he thought about Sherilie.

“Don’t talk like she’s dead. We can’t get our parents or your sister back without help. We need as many allies as we can get. The elders will have guards to spare. Now that the Skeksis know we’re leaving, that just means we don’t have any time to waste arguing.”

Eily began to weep. “But what if the elders won’t listen?”

Zale put a hand on her shoulder. “They will. And, if not, we’ll think of something else. I’m not giving up on our families, and I know that you won’t, either. We’ll go together and convince them to help us, and we’ll do it before the Skeksis can stop us from getting there. The Skeksis won’t kill our families, not when they can use them to bargain with us.”

“But how do we know that they’re still okay?”

Zale flicked the medallion around his neck. “Because luck is on our side.”

Eily gave him an incredulous look.

Zale said, “Normally, I believe that if there’s trouble we should just ride it out. Well, this time I intend to sail on this tide all the way to the end. I’m going to that castle to save everyone one way or another, and we can save them, Eily. But I can’t do it alone. Will you go with me?”

Eily smiled wiping her tears away with her sleeve. “Yes. I believe you. We can do it together.”

Zale packed so frantically that he barely remembered what he took. They still had trail rations and cheeses and other foods that would last for

a few days packed from the sailing trip. He had never been to Claw Mountain, but he knew the road was long and dangerous and the way to the elders would be well hidden. He hoped that they would be able to find it. Their first destination would be the council, but one way or another it would end at the castle. While Zale packed, Eily rushed off to get her belongings.

Zale glanced at *The Seastrider*. Even though it wasn't much, it was the ship he built with his own two hands, and it represented all his hopes and dreams for his future. He felt ill at the thought of leaving it on some unknown beach, but the Skeksis would expect them to sail to a port. Even though it broke his heart to think of losing the ship, the thought of his father and Eily's family suffering at the gnarled hands of the Skeksis made it seem very insignificant.

He thought, *They're suffering because of me. If I had just listened to Eily and thrown that journal into the fire, our families would have been waiting here for us. I'm such a fool. Why did Thra choose me? Why did I have those dreams?*

Zale instinctively grasped his charm and took a deep breath. As he stared into the distance, imagining the imposing crystal castle looming somewhere beyond the horizon, he knew they would need all the luck that they could get.

He shivered as he recalled Eily's words: "*Maybe Thra knows when you're going to need your luck better than you do.*"

J. M. Lee

Shadows of the Dark Crystal

Chapter One

Early-morning sun touched the back of Ipsy's hand, warming her skin in dappled spots of gold. She dozed, submerged in a dream of colorful, scaled swimmers flitting about in cool, clear water. Their fins were like gossamer, refracting the light in sparkles of red and gold, their gills full and frilled as they darted in between each other like ribbons. Ribbons at a festival, dancing in the air, the cascading sounds of music—

Ipsy's eyes flew open, and then she was on her feet, digging her toes into the twisted bark of the apeknot limb as she scrambled to gather her pack and her hunting spear. Neech—more furry and less slippery than the swimmers from her dream—squawked in dismay. He wrapped his limber, legless body about her shoulders to keep from falling as she grabbed a handful of apeknot vine and leaped, swinging out of the great, gnarled tree.

“Late!” she cursed aloud at herself. “Of all days to be late!”

Ipsy let go of the vine in time to land solidly on another outstretched limb and dashed along its whorled ridges. She grabbed here and there with fingers and toes as she ran along the grooves of smooth bark. When one branch ended, another was always in reach, and Ipsy made quick time through the canopy web of enormous trees, just another shadow flitting through the deep green Swamp of Sog.

She heard the glen before she saw it—the resonant sound of drums and pipes like heartbeats and the whistles of swamp creatures. Long ribbons of red, orange, blue, yellow, green, and purple streamed from the boughs of trees, and long knotted ropes strung from tree to tree. The streaks of color circled a wide glen and the music filled it, and at the heart of it all was Old Smerth, the hearthknot. The ancient tree towered over the rest of Sog, its branches and roots so big that Ipsy's entire village could be nestled and carved into the living wood.

Ipsy gave a little grunt of effort and took a flying leap from one outstretched apeknot branch toward Old Smerth's open boughs, landing with a big *THUMP* and a little *oof*. She scrambled down the limb and hopped inside the nearest entryway, a carved hole with a circular sill that had been sanded and engraved. Inside, the hall was round like a tunnel, though the color of the wood in which it was carved picked up the light coming from frequent entryways and smaller windows. Ipsy's footsteps echoed against the dry, golden passage, and she squeaked out greetings and see-you-soons as she passed Gelfling bearing woven baskets of fruit and swampweed, pickled treats and sweets. All were cloaked in the warm reds and greens of the summer festival—and here she was, still in her ranging gear!

“Mother!”

Ipsy burst into her family's chamber, stopping to lean with her hands on her knees and catch her breath. Neech gave a tiny chirp of relief, sighing with her and fluffing the fur around his neck into place. Ipsy's mother was seated on a small stool while two of Ipsy's three older sisters wound beads and colored string into her thick locs.

“Ah, Ipsyumylia, good morning!” said her mother with a warm smile. “Eliona! Ipsy is here after all. Would you fetch her dress? Diara, Sammi, not too many of the white. I'm a maudra, not a bride!”

Already swathed in an embroidered cloth of deep turquoise and gold, kind eyes young with laughter and skilled hands patient with wisdom, Laesid looked every bit the maudra of the Drenchen clan. Her beautiful wings shimmered at her back like a thick cloak of indigo and green; more magnificent than even those of Ipsy's eldest sister, Eliona, who bustled in with an armful of fabric.

“Ipsy!” Eliona cried, not so forgiving as their mother. “Where have you been? Oh, we hardly have time! Have you practiced?”

Ipsy plucked a damp cloth from the basin near where her sisters were tending to their mother, and swabbed her cheeks with it. Her embarrassment for being late eased long enough for her to stand straighter, puffing out her chest.

“Of course!” she declared. “And I'm not going to forget my Words and embarrass myself like Sammi did last season!”

Sammi, only a year older, gave a little, indignant *hmph!* but otherwise did not respond, training her focus on their mother's locs. Eliona *tsk-tsked* and shook out the dress she'd brought, a flowing garment of blue and sea-green. Ipsy shimmied out of her ranging gear and stepped into the dress, feeling instantly magnificent. It smelled a bit musty from being in storage for a whole season, but she imagined she looked better in it than Sammi had.

"There," Eliona said. She shooed Neech away with a gentle gesture and fussed with Ipsy's shoulder-length black locs. Ipsy looked down at herself, liking the way the colors of the dress looked against her dark olive skin. When Eliona finally smiled, flicking her iridescent, dark purple wings, Ipsy felt anxious.

"Can I wear the cloak?" she asked.

The quiet murmuring in the room went quieter still. Ipsy bit her lip, eyes going from her mother's wings to those at the shoulders of each of her three sisters. Even Sammi's had come in, though they weren't quite as beautiful as Eliona's or their mother's. Ipsy imagined standing in front of the entire Drenchen village, her shoulders still bare though every other girl her age had bloomed wings by now. It wasn't a secret that Ipsy's wings hadn't come in yet, but the thought of it being so obvious made Ipsy's courage shrink.

"Why?" Eliona asked. "You look lovely as you are."

"Let her wear the cloak if she wants," Laesid said. "Go on. We've no time to get unraveled with small stuff. Ipsy, love, come here."

While Eliona rushed off, Ipsy joined her mother, who took her hands and held them.

"Ready?" Laesid asked.

"Yes," Ipsy said with a confident nod. "Is Gurjin back yet? I want to be sure he sees me deliver the best Summer Blessing—a Blessing so wonderful he'll take stories back to the Castle to tell!"

"Gurjin would tell stories of his little cousins no matter what they did," Laesid assured her. She smiled, then scratched Neech on the chin until he purred. "Don't be distracted trying to impress. Remember, this is for you as much as it is for the rest of the village."

Eliona returned with the cloak that matched Ipsy's dress. Neech slithered down Ipsy's arm to make room for the mantle, a green, flowing

piece that covered Ipsy's back and shoulders.

"Good!" Laesid said. She reached to the floor and grasped her crutch, leaning on it to push herself up. Hidden beneath her cloak, her missing leg would have otherwise gone unnoticed, but like Ipsy's wings, it was no secret that Maudra Laesid had lost her leg in a fierce fight with a vicious tuskin. Ipsy wondered if her mother felt the same way about her leg that Ipsy felt about not having bloomed wings.

"Off we go," Eliona said, ushering her mother and sisters out the doorway. "Neech, you can stay with me while Ipsumylia gives her Blessing."

Neech spread his webbed wings and gave a little flap, lifting himself from Ipsy's arm to Eliona's. He purred when she scratched his ears. Eliona held Ipsy's cheeks in her hands and gave her sister a kiss on the forehead.

"Good luck," she said. "Remember—a Blessing is not a race, nor a contest. Take your time and the Words will come. There's as much to be said in the silence as there is to be said in song."

Ipsy grinned and shoved Eliona with a friendly push.

"Hush, you're not maudra yet!" she teased. "I'll be fine! See you after the ceremony!"

Ipsy gathered her skirts and sprinted down the hall toward the Grand Balcony. It was harder to move about in the dress and cloak, but she didn't need to be leaping from apeknot to apeknot right now. As she neared the balcony, she could hear the excited voices and music coming from the glen down below as the rest of the Drenchen tribe waited.

Her father, Bellanji, stood at the outlet to the balcony, stout and sturdy with his hunting spear wound in ribbon and streamers. He gave her a big hug when she reached him, pounding the butt of his spear against the wood floor to signal that the ceremony was about to begin. Drummers on the balcony began an invigorating crescendo of rhythm, exciting the crowd below to cheers.

"Ready, little leaper?" her father asked.

Ipsy felt her shoulders quake once with excitement, and then her father patted her shoulder and nudged her out onto the balcony.

"You'll be wonderful."

The sun was at its highest point now, warming the glen and shining on the smiling faces of the Gelfling scattered across the walkways and rope

bridges below. Ipsy grinned broadly and waved as the drummers finished her introduction. As the jubilant beat came to a close, the Gelfling of the Drenchen tribe quieted. With all eyes on her, Ipsy suddenly felt a nervousness she hadn't expected. What if she said the wrong thing? What if she forgot all her Words and said nothing at all? She'd never hear the end of it! As the glen fell silent, waiting for her, she searched the crowd. She saw familiar faces; this was her village, and these were her people. She took in a big breath.

"Greetings, Drenchen!" she called, projecting her voice as loudly as she could. Cheers responded back to her and she felt a bit of a smile forming on her lips. Her mother had taught her that smiles changed the sound of her Words, but it was even easier when it was genuine. But now what? What came after the greeting? Oh, yes:

"I am so honored this morning to lead the Blessing and commence the Summer Festival! We have all worked so hard through the cool season. I know that every one of you—*us*—has waited for this day of celebration, when we can—*may*—reap the benefits of our hard diligence both near and far."

Ipsy thought of her cousin, Gurjin, that moment, and she scanned the crowd quickly to see if she could pick out his face. From up on the balcony, though, it was hard to make out features. She could only hope he was down there, somewhere. The thought gave her a boost of determination; despite all his travels outside Sog, she would make him proud of their people.

"May we revel in the summer bounty. May the season be long and warm. May the apeknots grow twice as tall. May Wise Old Smerth embrace us with a thousand more rings of heartwood. May the three suns shine warmly in long days, and may we dream of beauty through peaceful, star-filled nights. May our stomachs grow fat and jolly with feast and our hearts and dreams overflow with the warmth the season brings!"

Cheers rose up, one at a time. Ipsy felt as radiant as the sun shining on a field of wildflowers bursting into bloom. It was as if her Words were magic, conjuring the same invigoration in her people that she felt in herself. She threw both hands in the air, throwing back the sleeves of her cloak with rampant enthusiasm. She shouted with joy in her lungs and the Drenchen shouted with her:

“The season is here! Let the Festival of Summer begin!”

Chapter Two

Ipsy's mother and sisters gave big hugs and kind words when Ipsy first emerged from the heartknot. Around them, the festivities were beginning: contests, games, music, and, best of all—food. Ipsy was anxious to be part of it, but her mind was still abuzz from the excitement of giving her speech. Her mother, seated on a stoop near the foot of Old Smerth, clasped Ipsy's hand.

"You were wonderful," Laesid exclaimed. "Just wonderful. I felt real energy in your words. How do you feel?"

"I feel in a daze," Ipsy said. "Did it sound all right? Could you hear me?"

"Yes, yes," Laesid said. "Especially that last bit!"

Sammi and Diara giggled a little, and even Eliona couldn't completely hide a smile. Ipsy felt her cheeks warm, but she shook off the blush with a fierce grin.

"I really meant it!" she said. "I was worried for a moment I might forget my Words, but I felt so happy, it didn't matter. And now it's time to celebrate!"

Ipsy spent the afternoon flitting between villagers, friends, and relatives, snatching a bite to eat here and there. Once or twice, she saw the broken sunlight glint off tempered steel and thought it might be Gurjin, but it was always an ornament dangling from someone's spear or a flash of light reflected off a musician's instrument. She threw feathered darts at overripe squashes and dunked her head underwater to snatch floating marsh pods in her teeth, laughing when they popped open and let loose flurries of fluffy, floating seedlings into the air like miniature clouds. Neech flew into the air and chased them, snapping his whiskered muzzle

in a vain attempt to catch each one before it was lost into the young summer sky.

As the sun set, the dinner feasting tables were spread out inside the Great Hall within Old Smerth. Ipsy sat with her parents and sisters at a long table, eagerly watching servers push carts of the best traditional Drenchen fare to and fro. On each cart were three trays, each stacked with wide wood-and-leaf bowls filled past the brim with squirming delicacies: fuschia wort beetles and fermented Nebrie-milk dumplings, mushroom wing-fronds, and Ipsy's favorite—blindfish plucked from the very bottom of the swamp floor. She took her helpings by the handful as the carts passed, piling them on the wide leaf in front of her. Neech stirred from his coil around Ipsy's neck, sliding until he balanced over her shoulder, and stretched his wings before he chirped and darted out to catch a leaf-hopper that had leaped too far from the table. He munched on it lazily while the band beat on drums in the center of the dining hall; the tumultuous song resounded off Old Smerth's interior. All sorts of creatures from the swamp had heard the music, and even now they were creeping in through the carved windows and between the chair and table feet, hoping to catch a delicious bite that had fallen to the floor.

"Ipsy! My dear Ipsy, congratulations on a beautiful Blessing!"

Ipsy's aunt gave Ipsy a hug and kisses before squeezing into a place on the bench near Ipsy's father. Bellanji gave his sister a nod and offered her a leaf-wrapped dumpling, but she waved it off distractedly. In fact, it looked as if she hadn't eaten at all, which was near impossible to do when surrounded by so much food, in Ipsy's opinion.

"Thank you, Aunt Mella," Ipsy said, remembering her manners. She looked around, waiting, but it seemed Mella was alone. "Is Gurjin with you? I still haven't seen him!"

Despite the festivities around them, Mella's mouth drew into a taut line and she wrung her hands. Ipsy felt herself frown in response; something was wrong.

"In fact, no. And I'm worried! He hasn't sent word in so long, and he's never missed a Summer Festival."

"He's probably busy at the Castle," Bellanji said. "It's a shame, but duty is duty. For all the banquets and feasts the Skeksis throw, they must have at least one celebration for summer."

“It’s not the same,” Mella said with a sigh. “Gurjin loves summer in the glen. He loves Nan Wimena’s dumplings. He loves playing pranks on the girls after they get done hanging the streamers from the apeknots. None of that happens at the Castle.”

“What do you think could have happened to him?” Laesid asked while her husband stuffed another of Nan Wimena’s dumplings in his mouth.

“Who knows, Maudra!” Mella exclaimed. “I wish he had never taken the job. He was too eager to leave Sog. The worst befalls castle guards, you know. They’re the first to be in danger!”

“Part of the job,” Bellanji said. “Listen, I’m sure he’s fine. Have you asked that friend of his—the Spriton? Maybe he’s got a secret romance to hide. In that case, he’s in more danger from you than anyone invading the Castle of the Crystal! Ha!”

Ipsy looked back and forth between her parents and her aunt. Despite her father’s attempts at consolation, Mella continued to wring her hands. Ipsy wanted to believe her father, and it made the most sense; when Gurjin did return home, he always told stories of walking the Castle corridors from sundown to sunrise, of long shifts patrolling the gate and sleepless nights standing guard near the Ceremonial Chamber. It sounded boring, but not dangerous. Still, Mella was right. Gurjin had never missed a festival, and he certainly wouldn’t have done it without sending word to his mother.

“It doesn’t seem worth sending someone out to find him, is all I’m saying,” Bellanji continued. “He’ll come home on his own when he’s ready. No one here wants to leave right after a festival like this one—”

“I want to go!” Ipsy blurted, hardly realizing she’d interrupted until after she’d done it. Mella startled before her ears swiveled backward with a hint of guilt. Before her aunt could reject the offer, Ipsy added, “I’m a great aim with a slingshot!”

“Ipsy, I appreciate it, but . . .”

“But what?”

Before Mella could elaborate, Ipsy’s mother mildly interjected, smoothing down the sleeve on her husband’s tunic.

“Don’t fret, Mella,” she said. “My gracious husband will leave to visit the Spriton village first thing tomorrow morning. He’ll ask for

Gurjin's friend. I'm sure she'll have an explanation. It's only two days' journey from Sog, so we'll have news before the children have finished eating tonight's leftovers."

Bellanji huffed through his nose, but when he saw the immediate relief in his sister's eyes, he gave no more sign of reluctance. He wiped his mouth and beard on the back of his forearm and nodded gruffly.

"Right," he said, as if it had been his idea all along.

"Oh, thank you," Mella said. She rose and clasped her hands together, bowing at the waist and embracing her brother. "Thank you!"

Bellanji waved her off and she retired, leaving Ipsy and her family to themselves again.

"Wish she would have just asked up front!" Bellanji rumbled. "All that soft talk and roundabout! Harrumph!"

"She was trying," Ipsy's mother said. "Thank you for going. It will calm her spirit."

"I tell you, Gurjin's probably with the Spriton as we speak," Bellanji continued with a sly grin. "Singing sweet songs to that Spriton girl, what's her name!"

"Jun," Eliona said.

"Jun!" Bellanji burst into melody: *"Oh, my dear Jun, my love, my sweet! Let me take off your sandals and clean your feet! And when they are clean, I'll take you home! To the swamp, the swamp, the Swamp of Sog! Bong, bong, bo-booooong!"*

Ipsy and her sisters melted into laughter. Even Eliona cracked a grin.

"Can I come with?" Ipsy asked after her father's bellowing laughter had died down. He swallowed his bite and roughed up Ipsy's hair. At first she was sure he would turn her down. He would say she was still too young, or that it wasn't worth two Gelflings' time to run an errand just to calm Aunt Mella's worries. Instead, though, he assumed a thoughtful pout and stroked his beard. Finally, he clapped his big hand on her shoulder.

"You know, why not. It's about time you left Sog," he said. "But it won't be all fun and games. You'll need to be sharp, stay on your toes! When I took Eliona out her first time, she nearly got carried off by a flying kriknat!"

Eliona blushed and put her face in her hand. "Father, please."

Ipsy's heart leaped. She had a brief, vivid fantasy of dashing through the swamp toward the northern border, of reaching the edge and looking out onto the endless sea of golden-green grass she'd only imagined. She turned to her mother, grabbing her sleeve. Even with her father's word, there was no way she was going without her mother's blessing.

"May I, Mother? Oh, may I?"

Laesid only smiled and patted the top of Ipsy's hand with her own. "You're asking permission, but I think your mind is already made up," she said with a chuckle. "Could even I stop you if I wanted?"

Chapter Three

Ipsy awoke with the sun, already feeling lightning in her fingers and toes in anticipation of the day ahead of her. She pulled on a light tunic, tucked her slingshot into her belt, and snuck out of her bedroom balcony, skipping along the walking-ropes to the edge of the glen. There she waited until she saw her father. They would travel north for two days before they reached the Spriton clan's valley.

Ipsy perched atop the knee of a raised apeknot root, looking back on the quiet glen. Only some of the festival's decorations had been taken down; the rest of the banners and streamers waved lazily in the early-morning breeze. Somewhere, she heard soft voices speaking kind words to one another, but Old Smerth was otherwise quiet. Peaceful, Ipsy thought. For a moment, she was struck with an almost sadness at the thought of leaving, as if she might never see home again. But that was silly; in fair weather and without trouble, the journey would be a handful of days there and back. Before she knew it, she'd be fighting for another chance to leave.

It wasn't long before she saw the big form of her father ambling out of the main tunnel in Old Smerth's roots. He was in a traveling tunic, a layer of sun-toughened swamp kelp scales strung from his belt and from a mantle hanging off his broad shoulders. In his hand, he had a big spear that made Ipsy's look like an eating skewer in comparison.

"Prepared, little leaper?" he asked with a jolly grin when he reached her. Ipsy took hold of her spear and traveling pack, leaping from her perch in answer. She swung her pack over her shoulder and followed her father as he began the climb up into the apeknots.

Once they reached the upper canopy, travel was easier. The bog below was soft and spongy, riddled with hidden pitfalls, quicksand, and nettle. Up

above, though, the apeknot branches intertwined in an enormous lattice. Ipsy traveled through the canopy web daily, but this time, she had to stay alert to keep up with her father. Bounding through the tangled trees and thick boughs, using his spear to vault from apeknot to apeknot, he was swift and powerful despite his bulk. At first she nearly asked him to slow down, but her pride held her tongue, and instead she pushed herself to match his pace.

“We’ll make it to Tall Pass, then stop for a bite to eat,” her father called over his shoulder. “I’d like to clear the bounds of Sog before nightfall. Maybe we’ll get lucky and you can taste your first bite of plains-growing grub tonight!”

Ipsy paused to catch her breath and rubbed her belly at a low grumble, thinking of supper roasted over an open fire. When the rumbling came again, though, she realized it wasn’t her stomach. The earth shuddered deep below the swamp, moving the overgrowth below her feet so wildly she had to crouch to keep her balance. Plumes of vine-shrubs curled in on themselves; the younger trees successfully balled into knotted fists while the older trees, armored in centuries of hardened bark, only shuddered, creaked, and cracked. Ipsy grabbed tight to the bark, digging her fingernails in and holding her breath, knowing that if she were tossed from the branch she would have no way to slow her fall.

As soon as she was able without fear of losing her balance, she leaped to her feet and looked for her father. He’d been knocked down below, nearly to the swamp floor. He was safe, it seemed, save for the monstrous form that had risen from the murky depths below them. Ipsy gasped and pressed her hand over her mouth at the sight of the beast. It looked like a swamp Nebrie, its bulbous head armed with tusks and dark, inky eyes on either side. This creature, though, was ten times larger than any Nebrie Ipsy had ever seen—and dark as midnight, looming up into the canopy with its flippers held wide.

As Ipsy drew her slingshot, the monstrous Nebrie lunged for her father. He jumped out of the way, and the sheer bulk of the monster broke through the limbs of the apeknot as if they were twigs. The Nebrie crashed to the swamp floor with a thunderous *BABOOOOM*. Bellanji braced himself, planting his heels and holding his stone-tipped spear out in front of him, waving it back and forth to draw the creature’s attention.

“Stay back!” Bellanji shouted. At first, Ipsy thought his command was for the Nebrie, but when he glanced upward, she realized he was speaking to her. “This creature is feral!”

The Nebrie groaned, pulling itself up and baring its tusks, each of which was easily twice the size of Ipsy’s father. Ipsy held her breath. She had never seen a Nebrie attack anything, much less a Gelfling; they were peaceful creatures, content to wallow in the swamp bog. They ate kelp and mud-crawlers—what had turned this one into such a monster?

Bellanji stiffened his back and followed the Nebrie with the head of his spear. “What’s driven you to such rage, Nebrie?” he roared.

Ipsy clenched her hand around the grip of her slingshot, legs immobile with fear. The Nebrie reared up. If attacked again, as quick as her father might be, there was no way he could escape the huge creature. Breaking from her daze, Ipsy drew a stone back in the pocket of her slingshot and let it fly, striking the Nebrie in one of its globular eyes. The rock harmlessly bounced away, but she had the thing’s attention. She drew back another stone and stepped out of her hiding spot. The wild Nebrie caught sight of her movement and turned toward her, pivoting away from her father.

“Ipsy, be careful,” her father warned, though he was backing away, out of the shadow of the Nebrie. From her higher vantage, Ipsy doubted the Nebrie could strike her. If she could lead it away from her father, he could ascend back into the safety of the canopy and escape. She let the stone fly and struck the monster in the face again, eliciting a howling squeal from it. The Nebrie reared, taller than she had thought possible, fixing her with dark eyes that sparked with a crackle of vicious violet light from deep within. Ipsy searched for any sign of intelligence in those eyes, but it was like staring into a deep, endless hole.

“Nebrie,” she said. She could hear her voice quaking. “Nebrie, please, come to your senses—we mean you no harm.”

For a moment, the darkness in the Nebrie’s eyes eased, almost warming to the brown silt color common to the species. But no sooner had Ipsy let out the rest of the breath she’d been holding than the shadows converged, fiercer than before. This time, Ipsy felt trapped in their darkness, frozen as she gazed into the flickering violet lights—

“Ipsy, look out!”

Ipsy turned just as the Nebrie turned and swung its head at her tree. Hundreds of birds exploded into the sky as the old apeknot splintered with a deafening *CRACK*, and then Ipsy was falling, falling, falling. She scrambled along the falling branch, trying to make it to another tree before she became caught in the tangles. When the apeknot fingers became too thin to hold her weight, she leaped. The leaves from the opposite bough brushed through her fingers, and then she was falling fast into the shadow of the dark nebrie.

She hit the murky lake, and the shock immobilized her as she sank. Like others of her clan, she had no fear of drowning; the gills in the side of her neck opened, and she breathed in a deep gasp of water. She sank deeper until her back touched the soft mud of the swamp floor. Neech, who had been hiding in her locs, swam about her, letting out little bubbles of worry, while overhead she saw the Nebrie's silhouette amid flashes of light. The water muffled all sounds except the groaning of the half-submerged beast. All she could do was hope that her father would be all right.

Her fingers began to tingle, and after what seemed like ages, she regained feeling. She flipped over, digging her fingers and toes into the mud below her and bending her knees to push herself upward, but then she stopped. Something hard was under her toes. She twisted and looked, then dug away at the mud and silt. Below the dark gray and black, there was a ripple of light—a sparkle of violet. She cleared the area and saw a thin vein of crystal running through the rock. Though it was only a thread's width, she found herself squinting instinctively, as if her body knew that the source—however distant it was—was so bright it might blind her. It was familiar—no, the same!

As she looked at the dazzling ribbon of mineral, the chaos above her seemed distant. It wasn't until a loud splash cascaded above her that she realized she had lost time, and she looked up. A body was drifting down toward her, blood reddening the water around it. Panic struck her and she forgot the crystal, planting her feet on the lake floor and launching herself upward. Her father was sinking, bleeding from a massive wound in his side.

She caught him and slowed his descent. He was still conscious but barely, still clenching his spear in his hand. Ipsy kicked, swimming

upward and pulling the weight of her father until they broke the surface of the lake.

Looming overhead was the Nebrie, still trembling and groaning in its rage. Froth flew from its muzzle and tusks as it sighted her. Bearing the bulk of her father's weight, there was no way she could escape. It let out an echoing wail, and despite knowing it was the Nebrie that had injured her father, Ipsy felt the agony in the creature's cry resonate with the pain she was feeling in her heart.

"Please," she called to it. She didn't know what else to do. She poured her honesty into her words, wishing, hoping, praying that it would reach the Nebrie. "Please, I don't know what plagues you. We're not here to harm you. *Please leave us in peace.*"

Ipsy held on to her father, cradling his head in her lap as he groaned gently. She blinked away tears and swamp water, closing her eyes and surrendering herself to fate.

"Ipsy," her father whispered. "Look."

He touched her hand and she raised her head. The Nebrie was bent backward, face toward the sky. The entire swamp was silent save for the dripping of water and then a low, rumbling moan. The cry was so miserable and pained it brought more tears to Ipsy's eyes. The Nebrie shuddered from fin to snout, then collapsed in a wave of flippers, whiskers and flesh. It heaved a breath, but the sound was ragged, deep, and hollow.

Ipsy waited in the silence for several heartbeats more before pulling her father up onto a bed of kelp and moss. Out of the water, Ipsy could see that the wound, although deep, was not as bad as it had seemed in the water when clouds and clouds of blood surrounded her. Fallen between two apeknots across the way, the Nebrie was dead. One flipper extended limply in the air, soon to be a perch and feeding ground for the scavenging animals of the swamp.

"Father," Ipsy whispered. "Father, are you all right?"

"Oh, hush," Bellanji grunted, sitting up and pressing a hand to his side. "Of course I am."

She searched the traveling packs that were buckled to his belt, looking for healing herbs, then tore cloth from his tunic and pressed it against the wound. Next, she found his spear and laid it nearby in case of any more trouble. Then she searched the canopy for any more danger but

saw nothing. All the creatures had fled, afraid of the monstrous beast the Nebrie had become. Her father waved his hand, but the motion was shaky.

“Don’t look so worried. If your mother can lose her leg, I can be scratched by a simple Nebrie. Ha!”

Ipsy felt some relief at his humor, but it couldn’t extinguish the worry in her gut. The Nebrie’s behavior hadn’t been natural. What if there were more? What if one made its way to the glen? The entire tribe would be in danger. Hissing with effort, Bellanji braced himself with his spear and pulled himself up.

“That wasn’t a simple Nebrie,” Ipsy protested. “I’ve never seen one so big and angry. And your wound—”

“Shh, Ipsy,” he said. She half-expected him to make another joke, laugh it off, but this time the humor in his voice had run dry. The wound in his side was taking its toll, and he solemnly gazed upon the fallen Nebrie. “You’re right . . . you’re right.”

“I saw something down under the mud—it looked like a crystal, the same color as the light in the Nebrie’s eyes. If they’re connected, it might not just be that Nebrie. There could be more creatures affected.”

Bellanji’s eyes went far away, but whatever he was thinking, he kept it to himself. After a minute passed, he jostled himself back together again, his beard-locs shaking with droplets of swamp water.

“You need to continue on to the Spriton tribe,” he said finally. “You need to bring them word of this. Tell them of the Nebrie, and what you saw down below. And after that . . . I must ask you to seek Aughra on the matter.”

Aughra. The name itself seemed to bring the swamp into a hush of murmurs, whispering mysteries.

“Why?” Ipsy asked. “I should at least help you back to Old Smerth —”

“It’s as you said, little leaper. This is no laughing matter. I can return to the glen on my own, but news of a monster Nebrie and dark stones beneath the swamp needs to be taken to the other tribes, and to Aughra, and fast. I don’t know that we have time to wait, and if you come back to the glen, the old council will get tangled up in all of it and slow things down even more.”

He shrugged out of his traveling pack—waterproof, as all Drenchen commodities were—and put it across Ipsy’s shoulders. She was dwarfed by its bulk and weight, but bore it with a straight back and feet planted firmly. Bellanji grunted and snapped his spear shaft short, then pressed it into Ipsy’s hands. She suddenly realized what kind of journey lay ahead of her, and trembled with both courage and anticipation.

“I don’t know how to find Aughra,” she blurted. “I’ve never left the swamp.”

“If you follow the ravine that flows through Tall Pass, you’ll reach the edge of the swamp. Continue upstream and within a day you’ll reach the Spriton village. Ask for their help to reach Aughra; if Gurjin is with them, he’ll go with you, and he’s a soldier strong as any.”

He chuckled but it was forced. “You’ll be fine. You’ve got the spirit and energy of youth on your side. Not like your old man.”

He leaned down and gave her a tight hug, though she could tell from the flinch in his eye that it pained him. Wrapped up in her concern for her father, she barely had time to think about the journey that lay ahead of her. Bellanji had never sounded so serious before, though, and he certainly wouldn’t send her off on her own if there wasn’t reason. She remembered the look in the Nebrie’s eyes and suppressed a shudder. She tucked her slingshot into her belt and threw her arms around her father for a last time, securing in her mind her quest: She would find the Spritons, tell them of what she had seen. She would find Aughra, mother of Thra, no matter where she might be hidden. She would seek Aughra’s wise old words and bring them back to Old Smerth in the glen to keep her people safe.

“Tell Mother I’ll make her proud.”

“I don’t need to tell her,” he said. “Take care of my little girl, Neech.”

Neech burbled, hugging Ipsy’s neck. She wiped away a tear, then darted up the nearest apeknot to the north, eager and anxious to begin her journey.

Chapter Four

By dark Ipsy had crossed the threshold of the swamp she had grown up in and called home, passing into the thinning marsh that marked the final perimeter of Sog. The air was already drier, cooler. As the sun set, she paused to pull a cape from her father's pack, wrapping it over her shoulders and around her neck to ward off the night's chill. The apeknots receded into the swamp, and within a few short miles, Ipsy's feet were treading the spongy ground of a marshland that would soon disappear altogether, evaporating into the great plains ahead to the north.

When the last of the marshland dried beneath her exhausted feet, she finally made camp. She found a small thicket and made quick work of climbing the flowering tree at the center, leaning with her back against the trunk and her legs on either side of a large branch to keep her from falling out in her sleep. She found a bite to eat stored in her father's pack, but rationed herself. She wasn't sure how easy it would be to find food in these new places.

"Guess we'll find out in the morning," she told Neech, who was waking. She scratched him under the chin and he gave a little purr.

That night, Ipsy dreamed she was lying atop a tall hill, staring into the dark heavens. Her hands were linked with another's on either side, grasping tightly yet gently as they dreamfasted together, sharing visions with one another and with Thra, below and all around. Overhead, the stars twinkled like gems, forming constellations Ipsy had never before seen. Only on the horizon could she make out the zigzag shape of Pillas, the snake.

Nerves awoke her. Neech was stone-still on her shoulders, all his spines puffed out and both ears pointed downward. Loud huffs and grunts

below were followed by the sound of crunching bark, and the tree quivered. Something was down there.

Ipsy held her breath and peered downward as slowly as she could. Though it was still mostly dark, the sun had risen enough for her to make out the form of a furred animal with enormous front paws hooked with claws. Its long and pointed snout flared with tendrils at the end, feeling up and down the bark of the tree while it sniffed and snorted. Ipsy's lungs pinched; she knew every creature of the swamp—what it ate and how it might behave around a Gelfling in the wild. But here in the open field, far from home, she had no clue.

The creature continued to circle the tree, clawing at the bark every rotation, and Ipsy caught her breath. Unlike the darkened Nebrie, this animal showed no signs of unnatural rage. Was it foraging? Or marking its territory? Perhaps it could be reasoned with. Or, perhaps, if she just left it alone, it would leave her alone.

But Ipsy was not so lucky. A moment later, the tree shook, and she heard the terrible sound of the creature's claws digging into trunk—it was climbing up! She leaped to her feet, pack rattling as she pulled it onto her back. Neech squeaked and hugged her neck as she sidled out along the branch, as far from the trunk as she could. She was smaller, lighter, and much more nimble than the beast; even if she were forced to the ground, she might be able to flee faster on foot, if she didn't break a leg in the process.

The creature sighted her, though *sight* wasn't necessarily the most appropriate term; as it reached Ipsy's branch, she got a closer look at its face and noticed it had no eyes, just its wriggling, star-shaped nose, huffing and puffing at her. Ipsy tightened her grip on her spear, feeling how heavy the spearhead was in comparison to the shortened shaft.

"Go on!" she said, puffing up her chest and planting her feet. "Shoo!"

To her relief, the beast hesitated. Maybe it hadn't been expecting a fight. Gaining confidence, Ipsy stepped forward and waved her spear. When the creature did not advance, and actually shifted backward as if about to retreat, Ipsy stepped again and thrust at it with her spearhead.

It was the wrong move. As soon as she attacked, the creature let out a squeal and lunged, slashing at her with its claws. She yelped and leaped back, barely catching her balance along the thinning tree limb. Her grip

didn't last for long; as the beast charged, its weight bore down on the branch, and the branch broke. Not willing to lay stunned below a tree for the second time in two days, Ipsy jumped as bough and beast fell together. Her ankles flashed with pain as she landed on the hard earth, but she landed intact, watching the creature thrash its way out of the tangle of branches and leaves. Her heart pounded, her breath coming quickly as she prepared to fight or flee. But in the field, where could she run? Now that she had angered the creature, it would surely chase her. She was much smaller and it would take more than one lucky stab to defeat it.

With an angry buck, the creature tossed the branch into the air, limbs, leaves and all. It cast about wildly, flanged nostrils spiked into the air. Ipsy took a deep breath and dug her toes into the earth, ready to fight. Before it came to that, though, a loud, shrill whistle echoed across the plain. Ipsy's adversary bristled, fur standing on end, and the creature's entire body froze. Ipsy's eyes turned instinctively to the sky, but she saw nothing but clouds. When the call came again, piercing the air, the creature made a little squeal and turned, loping off toward the cover of the nearby wood. Ipsy pivoted quickly at the sound of new footsteps, but relaxed when she saw who approached. It was a Gelfling—dressed in a long traveling robe and carrying a simple walking stick. His long, mahogany hair was pulled into thick braid at the nape of his neck. His ears were at a resting angle, though his light-footed gait was deliberate. At his back, the sun was rising.

"Hello there!" the Gelfling called as he neared her. "Are you hurt?"

Ipsy held her arms out in reply. She saw a small, round object in the boy's slender hand; when he held it up and smiled, she saw holes across its surface, like the finger-notches in a pipe. So that was how he'd made the sound that had scared off the big beast!

"Close one, eh?" he asked with a grin. "Glad to see you're fine. Good morning!"

"Good morning," Ipsy said. She put her hand over her heart and waited for the beating to calm. "Thank you. I'm ready to eat breakfast, not become it!"

He chuckled and she could hear in his voice that he was young, though still older than she. In the early-morning light, she could see his skin was red umber, like rich soil, and his eyes were the color of moss. She had never seen a Gelfling so small and thin, and she reckoned she might be

able to lift him over her shoulder if she found the need. His hair was soft and fell in thousands of fine strands, pulled into a long, sinewy braid that fell to the backs of his knees. As he turned to look toward her, she saw he had no gills in his neck, no spots or markings like those of her clan. Was he from the woodlands, or maybe the mountains?

“My name is Kylan,” he said. “You look as if you’re far from home. Where does your journey take you?”

Ipsy was about to respond, but she held her tongue. Even though Kylan had saved her, she didn’t really know him. She had never ventured outside the swamp before, and she wasn’t sure what to expect from other Gelfling. She thought carefully about how to answer before speaking.

“North towards the Spriton’s land,” she said. “I’m Ipsy, and this is Neech.”

Kylan made two little bows, one to Ipsy and one to Neech. Neech responded with a burbling murmur, though he loosened his coils on Ipsy’s shoulder, and in turn she felt a little wariness fade. Despite her earlier apprehension, Ipsy liked the way Kylan’s eyes smiled, as if something was always just a little funny. It reminded her of her father.

“The Spritons, eh?” Kylan was saying. He gestured. “Then you aren’t far off. If you see those two crops of trees there, pass through and it’s only a winding trail left until you’ve made it. I’m headed that way myself!”

Ipsy gave Kylan one more glance, up and down. She had to get to the Spriton village as quickly as she could, and after that she had even farther to travel to find Aughra—wherever Aughra could be found. Any help she could find along the way was welcome.

“Could we travel together?” she asked. “I’m good with a spear and slingshot!”

Kylan’s green eyes twinkled.

“I hoped you’d say that,” he laughed. “The whistle-call trick only works once, you know, and I’m not much of a fighter myself.”

“Good!” Ipsy said. “Then I’m glad to meet you, Kylan!”

Just as she was feeling confident with her decision to adopt a traveling companion, Ipsy’s cheeks flushed when her stomach gave a loud growl. Neech echoed the sound and added a mournful, pandering twitter. Kylan only laughed.

“And even more glad,” he said with a wink, “for some breakfast!”

Chapter Five

Kylan started a small fire using sparking stones from his traveling pack and cooked a breakfast of tubers and warm berries. They drank from their water pouches while the sun rose. Ipsy dug in the soft earth at the foot of grass clumps for worms, which Neech ate with a happy chitter and purr. Hunger satisfied, they packed up and headed north at a pace that was neither hasty nor leisurely; it was sustainable, and that was what it was meant to be.

When the ground became too hard and stony for Ipsy's bare feet to comfortably navigate, Kylan pulled a silver whittling blade from his pack and showed her how to fashion sandals from two small planks of wood and an arm's length of thick twine. They were awkward, and she couldn't imagine scampering anywhere in them at first, but by the time half the day had passed, she walked comfortably and was grateful that only small blisters developed—blisters that would soon grow into calluses. Without the sandals, she could only imagine the sore state her feet might have been in.

They chatted while they walked. Kylan was from a smaller Spriton tribe just south of Ipsy's home. Kylan's mother was the maudra of their clan, responsible for keeping the words of their heritage and history. It reminded Ipsy of her mother's role of maudra for the Drenchen, and she was pleased to know that she and Kylan held that in common. When it was her turn, Ipsy shared her own trials prior to embarking. When she told him of the Nebrie with the dark light in its eyes, Kylan grew quiet. Since Ipsy had met him, she found he usually chose his words casually, as a friend her age might. But this time, when he spoke, he sounded much more solemn.

"It saw the darkness," he said. "The light of darkness."

Though it sounded like a contradiction, when he said it like that, Ipsy felt as though it was the perfect way to describe what she'd seen in the Nebrie's eyes and beneath the silt of the swamp. The color had been bright, blinding—but when she had looked upon it herself, she'd felt as though she'd been pulled into a deep abyss. It was indeed a light of darkness.

"It was so frightening," Ipsy said, rubbing her upper arms to warm them from an imaginary chill. She kicked at a pebble with the toe of her sandal and watched it bounce into the tall, gold grass that lined either side of their path. "The Nebrie seemed so furious. Furious and sad. I don't understand, and I don't think the Nebrie understood, either."

"I've heard songs," Kylan said, in a soft voice. "Songs sung of a light shattered by corruption. That any creature that looks upon it becomes imprinted with its brokenness. It turns them mad, the way the reflection of sunlight in a pond splinters when a rock is thrown in. I thought it was a metaphor, at first, but I've seen things now that make me wonder. Fliers flying the wrong way during the wrong seasons, climbers climbing down instead of up. Sometimes it feels as though something has changed at the heart of Thra, and that change is creeping toward the surface."

Ipsy suddenly felt very small. Here Kylan spoke of the whole world as if it might fit in his hand, and yet she had never left the Swamp of Sog. The darkened Nebrie at Tall Pass had been news to her and her father, and would be to their entire clan, but it sounded now as if the darkness that had touched the Nebrie was older than the day before. How many creatures had looked upon it? Where was the darkness coming from? What had caused it? More important, could it be stopped?

Ipsy jumped when Kylan put his hand on her shoulder. It was comforting, and it pulled her mind out of the frightful spiral it had been spinning into. After a moment, though, she shied away, hoping he hadn't noticed something was missing below the hood of her cloak. She wasn't sure what he might say if he found out her wings hadn't bloomed yet. What would he think of her? Probably that she was still a child—a child with no knowledge of the world outside of Sog—and no wings, to boot!

To her relief, he said nothing and lowered his hand to his side. They walked in silence, and Ipsy wondered how long it would be before dark. It was quiet and the path was a long one. Words welled up in Ipsy's lungs

and, compelled to release the mix of emotions in her breast, she let them loose in song. It was an old nursery rhyme, one all children learned in the cradle and one all would remember to sing to their own children:

Come away with me, toward the hills

Where the mountains meet the skies

Ring encircled, palm in palm

Where the earth meets oceans wide.

Kylan uttered a quiet *Oh!* of surprise, but as she went into the next verse, he joined in, his deeper voice dancing below their two-part harmony:

Lay me down beneath the open sky

Where the river black runs deep

Hand in hand with eyes toward heaven bent

We shall weave a ring of dreams.

The silence that followed the ballad was easier than before, and Ipsy smiled. Kylan took a forked pipe from his satchel later and played it, making up tunes as they traveled to occupy the time. Neech stuck his nose out from under Ipsy's hood when Kylan started playing, taking a few sniffs of the open meadow air before curling back against her neck.

They made camp in a circle of stones after the sun set. Kylan started a fire and Ipsy unpacked enough dried swamp grass for two, plus a bite for Neech. Roasted over the fire, the spongy, thick leaves turned crispy and salty. She traced overhead constellations with her eyes, remembering her dream. She took in a deep breath of night air and imagined being back home in Sog, nestled in her hammock beside a smoldering hearth. She wondered how long it would be before she was back there again.

Ipsy opened her eyes at the dry sound of Kylan withdrawing a scroll from his pack. It was different from most of the scrolls Ipsy had seen. Unlike the wide, square maps her mother had shown her, Kylan's were narrow and thin, with dozens of thin lines of ink in tight rows one after the other. The two opposing ends were rolled around whittled dowels, wound so tightly they looked like tree rings from the side. Ipsy watched keenly as Kylan took a wood tablet and placed it across his lap. He stretched his

slender fingers and held them over the tablet, moving them in swirls and lines and dots. As he did, the shapes he drew in the air settled into the tablet, smoldering into deep lines of charcoal. The beautiful shapes flowed from his fingers like music from a lute, all intertwined in long lines across the tablet.

“You know writing?” she gasped. “Words that stay?”

Kylan glanced up with a smile that was just a little shy.

“My mother is a scribe as well as maudra,” he said. “It’s a skill she made sure I mastered very early. I practice it whenever I can. I write down my journey. I thought right now I’d write about meeting you.”

Ipsy circled the fire to sit beside him. He pointed to a string of intricate swirls and loops, straight lines and dots. “There. That’s your name. Ipsy.”

“My mother is maudra, too, but none of our people know writing.” Ipsy traced over the drawn words with her eyes, afraid to touch them lest she smudge the charcoal. It was right there: the shape of her name, for anyone to see, long after she’d gone. “Long ago, our elders did. They left behind some tablets, and some old things written into Old Smerth . . . but we only remember the meaning from song.”

“The Drenchen are known for their words of strength,” Kylan said. “I saw that in you this morning, with the ruffnaw in the tree! I suppose the Spriton are known for their spears and bows . . . but I don’t have the stomach for combat. I found writing easy, though, so my mother taught me.”

Kylan spoke the last with his eyes set on the scroll, pressing his lips together. It didn’t seem like he was going to say more on the topic, so Ipsy didn’t, either. She picked a twig from the ground and poked at the fire with it, letting loose a *pop* and a flurry of twinkling sparks. The sound brought Kylan out of his quiet, and together, they watched the embers dart back and forth on their way into the night sky.

Esther Palmer

Music of the Shards

Chapter One

The Gelfling

A single antari tree had no chance of survival. Thin and shallow rooted, they would have been pushed over by a strong wind, or harsh rain. But antari trees never grew alone. Living in forests of thousands, each antari stretched its branches, intertwining with its kindred in a complicated web of near-unbreakable strength. Antari canopies supported, protected, and fed countless species. Legend said that without the thin and seemingly insignificant antari, Thra—a world of great proportions—would surely collapse.

Under the antaris' protective canopy, a small and nervous widget stood on its thin hind legs, brushing the morning dew from its whiskers. Its ears, easily twice the length of its head, twitched in all directions. The widget was an overly cautious creature; being both small and the preferred snack of most everything, it stood ready to skitter back into the hard, shell-like petals it called home. Although its fur was the same color as the large flower in which it lived, it could not hide from the owner of the light green eyes, nearly the color of sun on new leaves, that watched from the webbed branches above. Cautiously, the widget darted from its shelter to search for soft antari nuts that had dropped during the night. Then down from the trees something swooped with wings outspread to muffle its descent. The widget offered only a surprised squeak as it was scooped off the ground.

"You really must pay more attention if you expect to make it through breakfast," a gentle voice scolded the small creature. Much relieved, the

widget buried its fuzzy little face joyfully into the crook of the speaker's arm.

Usha let out a light, musical laugh as she landed, folding her wings back under her cloak. Taking the creature in both hands, she lifted it to her face. The widget touched his cold nose affectionately to the young Gelfling maiden's cheek. This was a typical game between Usha and the forest creatures. Most of the good creatures, and many of the plants, knew her by sight . . . when they could spot her. Born into the Vapra clan, Usha had inherited the uncanny ability to hide. She was better than most and could disappear into any scenery. Ever since her first naming day, Usha's favorite game was sneaking up on the forest creatures and catching them by surprise.

Placing the widget on her shoulder, she let the creature burrow into her long hair, which was lighter than the sunbeams that dappled the forest floor. With a sigh, Usha confessed, "Grandmother says I'm too old to spend my days playing games and running wild. Soon, I will have to take my rightful place."

The widget gave a squeak. Usha nodded in understanding. She responded, "My rightful place as her apprentice, I suppose. Though I am sure Grandmother has many trine left before she rests under Thra."

Usha knew the forest well, and she moved swiftly through the maze of white branches. Her movements were nimble; she used her wings for balance and agility as she had seen the animals of the forest use their tails. Because her wings were far larger and thicker than those of the other girls in her village—who used them mostly for hovering or parachuting——Usha exposed them only while alone on her rambles. Wings like hers were so embarrassing and quite out of fashion.

She especially liked to roam the land surrounding the village, where she could be alone with the animals and plants. Usha never wandered too far. She knew better. Stories of the soul stealers, and dark tales of the Hunter, ensured that she never strayed beyond the plateaus of the west or the flatlands to the south.

Usha emerged from the antari forest and into the bright morning sun atop the high rocky cliff. Walking out to the very edge of the large boulder overhanging the cliff, she looked down at her village stretched out in neat concentric circles below. It was the largest of the Vapra clan villages—a

spot chosen for them especially by the Lords of the Dark Crystal themselves, long before Usha was born. The Greater Sun already shone brightly above it as the Rose Sun's light began to melt down through the streets, turning the huts and tent canvases a pale pink. If Usha didn't get back to Grandmother before the Dying Sun—the last of the three suns—rose and added its purple light to the sky, then she would be in for more than a long lecture—probably extra duty at the kilns, stoking the hot fires that never burned down. Grandmother made pots and vessels of all kinds, and dried all her own herbs. A special pot was made for each herb. Grandmother was good. The Ranee, queen over all Gelfling tribes, bought her herbs from Grandmother. Even the Skeksis, Lords of the Dark Crystal, had a pot or two.

More than any other day, today was a special day, and Grandmother had told her not to be late. Talking to the little widget, Usha said, "If you want to stay on my shoulder and get some bixa seeds as a reward when we get to the hut, you are welcome to come with me. But we'll have to take the fast way down. I am later than I thought."

With a frightened little squeak, the widget moved quickly back down to the ground. Even sweet bixa seeds were not enough to make the "fast way" appealing. With a laugh and a nod, Usha left the little creature where he was, and with one swift movement she unfurled her wings and jumped over the side of the long boulder. Her wings expertly billowed out at her sides as she caught the breeze, and with very few flaps, she glided gently down to the ground. Nearly late, she took to the ground running, finding the familiar path home.

Usha was proud of her home; it was unlike any other dwelling in Thra. But today, the village looked even more wonderful than ever! Every tent decorated with flowers and every street already filling with music. Today was the Celebration of Thra, and many from the seven Gelfling clans had gathered for this yearly festival. Usha could feel the excitement as she ran through the village streets, the colors and smells of the flowers filling her senses. Friendly voices hailed her as she passed, but she stopped for none until she heard the familiar taunt, "You look like a spindly-legged fluttery when you run!"

Usha slowed her steps to a walk, calling back, "And you move like a big, fat mounder, Flyn!"

“Better to move like one than to think like one,” Flynn replied with a laugh, trotting up to her side and matching her pace. Flynn had the dark hair, tanned skin, and dark eyes typical of the Orneth clan, as well as the typical overconfident attitude. “I knew I would find you on the road this morning.”

“It’s where I am most mornings, Flynn,” Usha replied with a smile. “As my dearest friend, I would hope you know that well.”

“I know many things about you, Usha,” Flynn stated, glancing sideways at his companion. “I just came from the village center. You will not believe the difference. There are so many new tents and booths displaying all kinds of new things. I heard skekEkt, the Lord of Ornaments from the castle, is actually coming to the festival today.”

Usha’s eyes sparkled with excitement. She would have dearly loved to explore the new decorations with Flynn, but Grandmother was expecting her. The village center would have to wait. They made their way to the last house in the village, which jutted off from the widest circle, and arrived at Grandmother’s hut. The large, round-roofed hut of reeds and skins was painted with the murals of generations, proclaiming to all that within dwelt a potter and herbalist. Smoke from the kilns billowed from the back, and the smell of drying herbs wafted through the air. Flynn held the hut’s flap open for Usha as they entered. Grandmother’s hut was enough for a large Gelfling family. Most of the space was filled with tables displaying pots, bottles, herbs, and all manner of wares for sale, as well as the clay and turntable workstations. Closing the flap behind him, Flynn declared proudly, “I have brought our Usha home safe and on time.”

Emerging from a back room, Grandmother entered holding a stack of red bowls painted with white symbols. Though slightly bent with age, with braided hair long since changed from silver to white, her eyes were bright and intelligent. She clucked her tongue when she saw Flynn. With a smile, she observed, “I suspect our Usha would have made it safe and on time even without your care, young bounder, for she is a good, kind, and obedient girl. However, now that *you* are here, you can be of use. Mother Tama needs those herbs there for her cakes for market. Would you be so kind as to deliver them for me?”

“With pleasure, Grandmother,” Flynn replied with a deep and formal bow. He scooped up the herbs, secured Usha’s promise to attend the

bonfires that night, and then was quickly out the door—no doubt spurred on by the hope of a taste of those famous cakes.

After he had gone, Grandmother commented to the closed flap, “A good lad, and one that is eager to prove himself.”

“He has always been a good friend,” Usha stated, already studiously at work preparing the tables for customers. “You and he are like family to me, since I have none of my own.”

Grandmother gave her ward a shrewd look, but she saw nothing in the girl’s face but innocent friendship. Satisfied, she said, “If you do your work swiftly, I will allow you time to wander the stalls at lunch, if you wish, and a few skekels to spend as you wish.”

“Grandmother!” Usha exclaimed in surprised joy. She did not often have much extra to spend on her heart’s desires. This would surely be a great day. Twisting her long, slender fingers as she often did when nervous, Usha ventured to ask, “May I get some wing ornaments or paints today?”

Grandmother’s face turned stern as she replied, “You know how I feel about such vanity. The way girls paint and pierce their wings these days, and render them almost unusable.” Then added in a whisper Usha did not hear, “*Which might just be the point.*”

“But even the Ranee paints her wings, though it is a subtle pattern,” Usha pointed out.

“Do as you wish,” Grandmother said, relenting, “but I would prefer you spent it on more useful things, like a new string for your harp, or an ocarina.”

Usha sighed and turned back to her work. There was much to do before the festival began. They could not allow the kiln flames to go out, for there were always pots and other vessels hardening. The heat made Usha’s skin itch and her eyes sting, but she never complained. Such magnificent things came out of those ovens, and Grandmother had even allowed her to set up a table just to display her own creations—lamps with herbs baked right in to the patterns so they smelled wonderful when warmed. Everything was set, polished, and trimmed in good order, the work made even lighter with the promise of happiness to come.

Chapter Two

The Council

Usha itched to be at the festival. Without complaint, she had helped Grandmother run the sale tables from the shade and cool of the hut. Gelfling from nearly each of the seven clans had walked through the flap to browse Grandmother's goods. She was sure there had never been so many at the festival before. When Usha had questioned why Grandmother hadn't set up a booth in the market itself, she simply replied, "If what I have is what they want, then they will find me."

It certainly seemed true. Many had come to Grandmother's hut, most to buy, some merely to escape the heat of the day, and not only Gelfling. The Podlings had come; Usha could hear their music filling the streets outside with joyful noise, though she didn't understand their language. A new face in the hut had surprised her greatly. He looked like a Podling, short and round with small eyes and a wide face, but his skin and hair were gray and chalky, and his eyes were pale and distant. He moved in a trancelike manner, as if his actions were not his own. Grandmother dealt with him swiftly and warily, and then watched with a concerned expression as he left with his herbs. All she said to Usha's questions was that the creature had come from the Castle of the Crystal. Perhaps that meant the Skeksis really would come to the celebrations.

A large commotion outside brought Usha to the hut's door. Walking up the street, with much ceremony, was the Ranee's own caravan! The tall Landstriders towered over Gelfling heads, over the roofs of booth and hut. The queen's guards rode beside her on lean, pink male striders, looking serious but friendly. The Ranee herself sat atop a rare white strider, a

female with long, soft whiskers. When the caravan looked to be stopping at the hut, Usha retreated quickly to her place at the table and waited expectantly.

The Ranee entered the hut with a regal smile. She was beautiful, with her light hair woven into spirals all about her face. She was queen of all Gelfling, but the Vapra looked at her as their pride, for she was of their clan. The other Gelfling in the tent bowed respectfully, and she addressed many of them kindly by name. She moved lightly through the tent, scanning the tables of wares, her gossamer wings drifting behind her, nearly transparent at points and decorated only with pale paints depicting ancient Gelfling runes proclaiming her ancestry. Usha felt privileged to be able to read them, but the sight of the Ranee's perfectly diaphanous wings only reminded her of her own woefully stout ones, and she made sure to keep them tucked away under her cloak.

Grandmother approached the Ranee with arms outstretched in joyful greeting, and they embraced. Grandmother exclaimed, "It is good of you to grace my humble home, Ranee."

The Ranee smiled and declared, "You are my oldest friend, and the best potter and herbalist on Thra. I do not get here as often as I would wish."

"You are always welcome," Grandmother assured her. "And the weight of rule sits heavy on any shoulder."

The Ranee nodded, but turned her eyes to Usha and the young Gelfling blushed. The Ranee asked, "And how are you getting along with your apprentice? I hope she is obedient and studies well."

The penetrating look she gave Usha then made her feel as though the Ranee was looking directly into her heart. Usha did not know why the queen took such an interest in her—perhaps it had to do with her friendship with Grandmother—but she instantly wanted to prove to the Ranee that she was not a disappointment.

"She is kind, obedient, and constant in her studies," Grandmother reported. "I could not be more pleased. She will soon know more about Thra than I do."

Usha blushed even deeper. That was surely an exaggeration. She was sure she would never measure up to Grandmother's greatness. She was just a simple Gelfling maiden. Fishing in her pocket, Grandmother brought

forth a few of the small colored stone coins used among the Gelfling and handed them to Usha, saying, "I believe the triple suns are high in the sky. Time for you to explore the celebrations on your own. Enjoy."

Usha took the coins happily and, after a very proper curtsy to the Ranee, she was out the hut and into the streets, ready to take all the joy she could from the day. The Celebration of Thra was a day to honor nature, to give thanks for the world. The only question on Usha's mind was where to begin. Should she start with the flower dances near the fields, or wander over to the village center and look at the market stalls? Perhaps she could grab her harp and join the music makers celebrating the joy of the moment.

"Usha!" a young Gelfling maiden with golden hair and large brown eyes exclaimed, running over and embracing her friend happily. Turning and fluttering her wings experimentally, she asked, "Do you like? I just got them."

The maiden's wings caught the light and glittered with small silver bells dangling from the edges, they made soft music every time she moved. Smiling at her friend's joy, Usha exclaimed, "They're wonderful, Kirsi! Now you'll have music everywhere you go."

"Well, if I can't play as well as you, I might as well make what music I can," Kirsi stated with a wink.

"At least now she'll never be able to sneak up on anyone ever again," a voice called out from the crowd.

The girls turned to find a fair-haired boy walking toward them with a mischievous grin. He was tall for a Gelfling, and handsome. He used that to his advantage. Kirsi fluttered her eyes at him but replied sternly, "You are only mad because I beat you at the Grift Sticks game, Akil, *and* you're jealous because boys don't have wings."

Kirsi might have spoken harshly, but Usha knew that she liked Akil very much and would not have minded in the least if he asked her to the bonfire that night. He shook his head and replied with a wink, "I think I've found me a nice pair of wings already."

Kirsi blushed. She pulled Usha away in a hurry and declared, "Well, I'm taking Usha to the ornaments booth. Follow us if you dare."

Akil did not follow, but he certainly watched them as they went. The village center was dazzling, with many new and interesting things, but

there was one spot in particular that held the biggest crowd. Standing among large tables brought especially from the castle, stood skekEkt himself! He was the Skeksis's Lord of Ornaments, and he certainly looked the part. Easily twice the height of a Gelfling, he towered over the gathered crowd, looking down at them with his thin beak curved into a smile. He looked like a bird with no feathers, unless you counted his clothes. His robe was light green and hung with all manner of jewels and trinkets that sparkled and rattled as he moved.

With all four arms, he gestured to the magnificent objects on his tables as he called cajolingly to the Gelfling, "Come and see the wonders I have made just for Gelfling."

A few of the pale gray creatures stood obediently by the tables, unmoving unless given a specific order. Kirsi made her way to the front of the crowd and Usha followed. Despite the smiles, Usha was a little overwhelmed by skekEkt's looming figure. Kirsi seemed to have no such reluctance. Eagerly she showed Usha the bells she had bought. There were so many amazing things on the tables, but one particular jar caught her eye—paint. Not just any paint, but paint guaranteed to sparkle and shine, even in the dark. Usha longed to have it.

"Ah," announced a pleased voice above her. Usha looked up to see skekEkt looking directly at her with his black, shining eyes. He said, "I see my special paint has caught your eye. Excellent choice. Not only will it shine, but it is guaranteed to make any wing look as light and delicate as a spider's web."

At a signal from his clawlike hand, one of the pale creatures came forward and blankly offered Usha a jar. She almost took it, but then she remembered Grandmother's words to the queen . . . was she truly good and obedient? Usha wanted so much to do the right thing and make Grandmother proud of her. With some little regret, Usha declined the pot, shaking her head sadly. SkekEkt did not seem pleased, but through his ever-present smile, he urged her, "You will come back. I've all kinds of pretty things, just for Gelfling."

Pulling Kirsi away, Usha left the Skeksis tables with a small sigh of relief. It felt good to get away from the crowd. Turning her attention to the Gelfling-made-craft tents, Usha browsed the musical instruments. Happily, she spent most of the coins Grandmother had given her on a new

instrument, a beautifully carved gemshorn—made from the hollowed-out tip of a moulder horn, painted and carved with her favorite blue flower. Eager to show Grandmother her new purchase, Usha skipped off, promising to meet Kirsi at the dances later.

After rushing through the winding, circular streets, Usha came to the hut door and was surprised to find it closed. Untying the flap and heading in, she could see the front room was deserted, though pots and herbs still rested on the tables. Concerned, she moved to the back room. No one. Peeking into both her and Grandmother's room, she found no one. Walking out to the kilns, she heard movement coming from the tent behind them. Normally they used the tent for storage, but it was now almost empty because of the festival. Now, creeping up to a small hole used for ventilation, Usha peeked inside.

She saw the shelves were gone, and scented candles now lined the floor. In the dirt were drawn circles of ancient Gelfling runes and symbols. Sitting around the outer circle were six Gelfling, including Grandmother and the Rane. They each held hands, their eyes closed. Dreamfasting—sharing greetings and memories among each other. It was a common practice to begin a gathering of the Gelfling Council. It was impossible to lie while dreamfasting; everyone would know your thoughts and concerns. Soon, they each lowered their hands and opened their eyes.

Her curiosity overcoming her reluctance to eavesdrop, Usha listened closely as the Rane began the meeting by stating, "We are Gathered here as Council of the Clans. I have heard your concerns. I asked for this meeting to remain secret as there are serious matters to discuss, but I do not wish our words to spread to the others and cause them undue worry, at least not yet. As queen and Council, we should be able to resolve this among ourselves."

"I see neither the Grottan nor the Dousan clans have bothered to come to Council," grumbled Valda, the Spriton clan chief. Her close-cropped hair and tattoos made her look just as gruff as she sounded.

"We may be able to take that as a good sign," Grandmother suggested. "If they feel no concerns heavy enough to bring them from their seclusions, then there are no immediate dangers."

"Or so think they," Valda muttered, but she did not pursue it.

“There is a growing concern of the number of Gelfling who have gone missing of late,” the Ranee declared, bringing all to order.

“Two whole families have disappeared from the farms,” Grandmother stated sadly.

“We have lost scouts on three occasions,” the Valda added.

“And we have lost sailors,” agreed the Gelfling with the red bandana tied in her hair, hoops in her ears, and a long-tailed coat—certainly Koa, the Sifa clan chief.

A short, squat, hairy Gelfling with brown clothes mottled in dried mud admitted, “We are missing friends as well.”

“Are you sure you just didn’t misplace them in the swamp,” Valda said mockingly, “or mistake them for a pile of rotting lizards? I have made that mistake myself with the Drenchen.”

The squat Gelfling—Nipa, the Drenchen clan chief—looked as if she was about to explode with anger, which didn’t help her complexion. The Ranee intervened, calming all with her voice, “We must not fight amongst ourselves. Now is a time to *help* each other. Dani, chief of the Orneth clan, what have you to report?”

Somewhat reluctantly, the tall, dark-haired Gelfling with the grim look admitted, “There are those whom we have sent over the wastes to the Castle of the Crystal who have never been seen again. The Emperor assures us he is doing all he can to find them, or information on their fate. He knows that Orneth are invaluable guards at the castle.”

“More like convenient toadies,” Valda muttered.

“We guard the castle and our friends the Skeksis faithfully and with courage!” Dani declared with pride, her eyes flashing with warning.

Valda was about to retort, when the Ranee interjected, “And what of those gray creatures that have been coming from the castle?”

“I had audience with the Chamberlain himself,” Dani answered, turning back to her queen. “He assures me that those creatures have not real life. They are a creation of skekTek the Scientist, just like the Garthist they use for mining. The Skeksis call them Slaves, and they are under the direction of skekNa. These Slaves only *look* like Podlings—they were modeled after them.”

“There is something about them that does not sit right in my bones,” Grandmother confessed with a shudder. “They are empty.”

“But what of the missing Gelfling?” Koa insisted.

“We’re under attack,” Valda declared.

“By whom?” Dani scoffed. “Soul stealers? The Hunter?”

“You cannot believe in such bogymen,” Koa laughed.

“They are not myth,” Grandmother insisted, and everyone quieted.

They had long learned to trust Grandmother in such things. She saw things. “There are creatures in the wilds that have turned evil, poisoned by something dark. Changes are happening all around us.”

“There has been a gathering darkness growing all through Thra,” the Ranee agreed.

“Like the sea, life always changes,” Koa pointed out. “There have always been changes, and we are happy.”

“We should demand an answer from the castle!” Valda advised. “I say it all stems from there. We should fight.”

“There is nothing to fight,” Dani stated heatedly. “The Skeksis have been nothing but kind to the Orneth clan. Perhaps if the Spriton were not so eager to offend, you would see that they only wish to help.”

“What do we really know about their plans?” Grandmother asked the room, hesitantly but with concern.

“Not you, too,” Koa asked Grandmother with a sigh. “The Sifa also owe much to the Skeksis. SkekSa himself has helped improve our ships immensely. Now he uses our vessels for his own work. You cannot deny that the Vapra benefited from their help. They do much to keep you safe and well.”

“But for what purpose?” Grandmother questioned, but quietly so that only Usha, the Ranee, and Nipa seemed to hear her. Addressing the entire room, she suggested, “If they are so concerned about us, then it would do no harm to ask about the disappearances. It has gone beyond what could reasonably be put to runaways and accidents.”

“We need not disturb them,” Dani insisted.

“We do not want to look as if we are accusing them of anything,” Koa agreed.

Valda slapped her hand on the dagger she kept perpetually at her side and declared, “I say we demand answers. We are many and they are few. They couldn’t stand against our persuasion.”

“Is it not up to our queen to decide?” Nipa announced with a drawl. “We need not stir ourselves into needless arguing. The Drenchen will stand by any decision the Ranee makes.”

“As long as it involves no work for them,” Valda muttered, but the others ignored her.

The Ranee closed her eyes, deep in thought. It was well known that she wanted to avoid causing strife among her chiefs, but if she could feel something dark growing, and if there was any kind of threat for her people . . . She opened her eyes and announced, “I will go to the Castle of the Crystal myself. Perhaps by going personally it will convince Emperor skekSo that we are not accusing him or his people of anything, but expressing concern for our own. I, of course, will need some special supplies for the journey. I rely on you, Grandmother, for your help.”

Usha, watching carefully from the outside, was the only one who noticed the knowing, almost secretive, look that passed between them before Grandmother replied, “Of course. I am at your service.”

“At your service!” the chieftains chorused together.

As the clan chiefs began to take their leave, Usha crept quietly away, sure it was not right for her to have listened in on the private council. She knew, of course, that the queen trusted Grandmother’s words, but she did not know that Grandmother was part of the Gelfling Council. She had never sat in honor at the public meetings. Even stranger were the reports she had overheard. Were Gelfling really going missing? Usha had known some from her village had been there one day and then gone the next, but travel between villages and marriage between clans was common. Disappearing and not being seen again . . . that was something she had never considered before.

As she walked from the hut, lost in thought, strains of a sea shanty drifted toward her from the fields. The dance! She had promised to play, and this was one of her favorite dances. If she did not hurry, she would miss it. Shaking the gloom from her mind, Usha ran for the fields with a smile. After all, what were some faraway shadows compared with the joy of today?

. . .

“We all know Fanfins are fierce creatures, all sharp teeth and powerful legs. Though they are small, they travel in packs of dozens. No Gelfling would dare tangle with them alone, but that nightfall all that could be found of the entire herd were a few scattered bones. The Hunter had struck again.”

Several of the Gelfling gathered around the fire gasped in fear as the designated storyteller ended his tale, the flickering light from the fire playing on his long face and making the story that much more thrilling. No celebration would be complete without the storytelling. As the Gelfling often said, a well-told tale was worth more than all the jewels in Thra. Recently, their tales evolved into stories of the Hunter, a lightning-fast beast of darkness and hunger that filled many nightmares. The young enjoyed the scary tales while sitting safely surrounded by friends near the fire at the cliff base. The next storyteller took her place before the fire, and with a slow look over her audience, she began with a grim warning, “Never wander into the wild lands, for that is where the soul stealers live. If they catch you, they will drain your living essence—your Vayu—from your body, leaving you a shell, a being without life or death. My tale will show how our Skeksis protectors banished the soul stealers from the Castle of the Crystal.”

Everyone huddled closer together to enjoy the tale. All except one. Usha could not sit and listen any longer; the words exchanged at the council meeting weighed heavily upon her. Standing from the log where she had been sitting, she turned from the fire and began to walk away, she knew not where. Instantly, her friends were at her side.

“I have heard that tale so many times. I do not need to sit through another,” Flyn declared as he joined her.

“There seem to be more dark tales than before,” Kirsi observed, catching up to her friend and hooking Usha’s arm with hers. “I prefer the stories from the birth of Thra, and Aughra and the great Gelfling of the past. Do you think the stories are true?”

“What? About Aughra?” Akil asked, surprised, taking his place at Kirsi’s side. He had grown increasingly fond of her company, which the maiden did not mind at all.

“No, silly,” Kirsi answered. She gave a pretty shudder as she continued, “I mean the Hunter and the soul stealers. Do you think such

dark things exist?”

“I’ve never seen such things,” Akil stated dismissively.

“But there have been so *many* Gelfling going missing,” Usha stated, her voice catching in her throat.

“Have there?” Kirsi asked with fear.

Usha only shrugged. If Kirsi insisted, she would have to say how she had heard it, and she did not think that would be right.

Puffing out his chest, Flyn declared, “Well, do not worry. I can protect you, Usha! I am, after all, in line to be a castle guard. My father, my grandmother, and many of my family have been faithful guards. I would never let anything happen to you.”

Just at that moment, in the silver light of the moon, Flyn did look like a warrior, a hero. Yes, many Gelfling were strong and great, and if they could protect the castle, then certainly they could protect the village. Perhaps there was nothing to fear after all.

Chapter Three

The Hunted

The next day's suns shone brightly overhead. In the shade of the forest, a shadowy figure moved quickly between the trees. Even the small widgets did not know of his passing until he was upon them, although he did not bother with them. He'd had his fill of widgets and crawlies, and even Nebrie. His meals were large and lavish, but they could not sustain his hunger for long. No, he hungered for challenge. He was the Hunter, and he relished this appetite. Donning his mask and cloak, enchanted to hide his true form, he had set out to satisfy his desires. Melding into the shadows held a strange freedom: he *was* shadow, he *was* darkness, and none could stand before him.

He ventured close to that Gelfling village, although he knew the Emperor would grumble if he found out. Perhaps later he would bring the Emperor a gift or two, but today he hunted for himself. A noise, sickeningly like a tinkling bell, caught his attention and he paused. Somewhere, so close he could smell them, Gelfling played. So innocent, so naïve—he hated them. The Hunter would teach them, he would show them that even sunny days hold dangers.

• • •

“I found you!” Usha declared triumphantly as she grabbed at the flowering berry bush. With a laugh as sweet as tinkling bells, a second Gelfling appeared where there seemingly had not been one before. Both

girls happily fell to the soft forest floor, Usha declared, “You’re getting much better at this, Hema. Now, it is my turn to hide.”

Hema, a trine or three younger than Usha and at least a foot shorter, sat up with a smile. “But you are so much better at Hide than I am. It will take me ages to find you.”

“And so you’ll learn how to hide better next time,” Usha replied. She enjoyed teaching the younger Gelfling the tricks of blending in. “Come on, I’ll give you the advantage. You can give me to a mere fifty count before you come looking. What do you say?”

Hema nodded eagerly. Putting her hands over her eyes, she began immediately to count. Usha ran off quickly. Once out of the clearing, she hesitated, wondering where to hide. Then, with a mighty push of her strong wings, she jumped easily into the trees. Flitting from tree to tree, she finally settled in comfortably among a distant antari’s leaves. Usha waited. And waited. Even after the counting should have been over, she heard nothing. Surely, she should have seen some sign of her friend by now. Growing strangely uneasy, Usha began to wonder if she had hidden too well. Then she heard the scream. Hema!

Usha shot through the canopy, searching for her friend. Below, she found a crushed berry bush and a tree stripped of its limbs—something bad had happened here, but where was Hema? Moving on through the trees, Usha tracked her friend. Finally, she saw her huddling in the shadow of a large, dead log, only half-hidden and shivering. As Usha made to call to her friend’s name, the shadow grew darker. Suddenly, a creature loomed over Hema. Usha blinked. She had never seen a creature like this; it moved like a liquid shadow, its darkness flowing about it as if by its own wind, its face blank and pale as the moon.

The Hunter! Usha thought to herself with horror. *There is nothing else it could be. The Hunter is real, and right here.*

Hema screamed. The Hunter bent down and covered her with his cloak. Then the screaming stopped. Usha paused, perched on a treetop, stunned and frozen in fear. She could not move, and her mind refused to accept what her eyes saw. The black figure stood. The blood, Hema’s blood, stood out on the creature’s dark cloak, spattered on its blank face. Red and black. Later, that was all Usha could remember of the scene, the

horror of the red and black. Still, she sat frozen in place. The Hunter raised a skeletal-looking hand up and pulled off his face.

No, no it was a mask. Skeksis! The Hunter was a Skeksis. *How? Why?* So many questions flooded Usha's mind, and they seemed to energize the rest of her. With enough thought to move as quietly and as hidden as she could, she raced back to the village, not knowing what to do or say when she got there, but knowing she had to tell someone.

Using her wings and the treetops, Usha flew home, not caring for the cuts and bruises, or for who might see her. She could not think or care of anything until she found herself back in her hut. Standing, dazed in the middle of the front room, she called hysterically for Grandmother. Nothing. *No! No, the monster could not have been here!* Usha panicked, yelling louder and louder until she could do nothing but cry.

The flap to the hut opened and Grandmother entered with fresh herbs ready to be hung and dried. She saw Usha curled up and sobbing on the floor. Dropping the bundles, she rushed to Usha's side, encircling the maiden in her arms. Grandmother said soothingly, "Hush, my sweet. Grandmother is here now. Tell me what could be worth so many tears." Raising her head and finding her voice, Usha confessed, "I saw it, Grandmother. It found Hema and, the blood . . . it was the Hunter, Grandmother. I saw him. It was Skeksis!"

Grandmother's face turned grim; she did not doubt Usha's words. There was anger in her voice as she said, "It is worse than I feared. We must act."

Relieved to have Grandmother at her side, Usha pleaded, "But what can we do?"

Looking at her charge with sympathy and affection, Grandmother answered, "You must rest from your shock. I must inform the Rane of what you have said. There is much to be discussed."

Usha shook all over, needing Grandmother's help to reach her cot. Obediently, she lay back on her cot, but she could not fathom how she could sleep. Her heart, her soul was exhausted, but her mind could not rest. Gently, Grandmother pressed a cup of something to her lips and Usha drank. Grandmother sat, humming and stroking her hair as she used to do when Usha was a very young Gelfling. It was familiar; it was safe. For a while, Usha's mind revolted against it; how could anything be the same

again after what she had just seen? Eventually, the herbs did their work and she slipped into a deep, restorative sleep.

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Usha woke slowly. Judging by the light coming from outside, it was late afternoon; she must have slept for hours. Why had Grandmother let her sleep so long? Slowly, reluctantly, Usha's mind recalled the events of the morning. A knot of fear and mourning twisted in her stomach. Her heart felt so heavy, she was not sure she could ever rise from her cot again.

The sound of clattering pots and hurried searching disturbed the silence of the hut—Grandmother was back from speaking with the Ranee. With great effort, Usha forced herself to stand and walk to the front room. The room was in chaos! Pots were open and overturned, every trunk and sack rifled through. Before Usha could do more than wonder at the state of things, Grandmother came rushing in from the back, her hands and clothes spotted with soot.

“Grandmother?” Usha voiced hesitantly, the knot in her stomach growing.

Grandmother paused and turned as if she had not seen Usha standing there. Hurrying over, she grabbed Usha's hand and spoke urgently, “There is little time, my sweet. Please, grab your traveling cloak and meet me in the supply tent. Quick now.”

She looked so serious, Usha could not argue. With a nod, Usha turned and ran back to her room. Throwing open her trunk, she dug out her cloak and threw it over her shoulders. After a moment's hesitation, she grabbed her herb hunting sack and her new gemshorn, though she couldn't say why. Taking one swift look about her room, wondering if there was anything else she should grab, Usha turned and ran for the tent behind the kilns.

For the first time in Usha's life, the kilns stood cold and silent. It felt unnatural. A chill crept into her bones, caused by more than just the chill in the air. Something had gone terribly wrong. Usha jumped as the tent flap flung open. Grandmother strode in, holding a square bundle, the outside stained with countless years of black ash.

“Sit, child, for there is much to explain,” Grandmother advised, now looking calmer, but just as grim. They both sat in the dirt, remnants of the

rune circles still present. Laying the bundle between them Grandmother said, “You deserve to know all, but I am afraid there is not time. You will have many questions, but I will tell what I can. What do you know of Rian?”

Rian. It was a name not often spoken of, but Usha managed to reply shakily, “He is the traitor—a Castle guard who, many trine ago, betrayed Skeksis and Gelfling, trying to spread lies and war.”

That was the story the Chamberlain had given, and she had never questioned it, but now . . . could she still trust so completely?

With a sigh, Grandmother bent forward and unwrapped the bundle to reveal an old, leather-bound book. She explained, “This is the journal of Rian. All he learned, all he discovered. It is not all complete, but it was entrusted to my family to keep safe. The Skeksis would do much to destroy it, for in it is described their lies and their dark works. They need Gelfling, Usha, stealing our lives to give themselves strength. I believe it all. Rian died protecting the truth. We Gelfling, we were just not ready for it, and I am not sure we are ready now.”

Usha touched the book cover hesitantly, as if fearful it might burn her. She was not sure what to believe. She demanded, “Why tell me all this now?”

“Because much has happened,” Grandmother replied, the urgency returning to her voice. “The Ranee has fallen into Skeksis claws, and I fear she is lost.”

“What?” Usha exclaimed. All of this was coming at her much too fast.

“We can ignore the growing darkness no more,” Grandmother declared. “You must take the journal, Usha. You must go to Aughra and ask her advice. We must convince the tribes we are not safe. The Thra-Mother will know how.”

“But why me?” Usha sputtered, her mind in a reel, “This is for the council, or some warrior. Not me.”

“The task belongs to you,” Grandmother insisted. “Usha, I—”

She froze. Usha’s heart jumped to her throat. With a speed incredible in one so old, Grandmother pounced and captured something in her hands. Usha stood to look. At first she thought it was one of the crawlies, but she gasped when she saw it clearly. The thing was black and eyeless, with a

slash of dark purple down its spine. Without hesitation, Grandmother smashed it to the ground and it shattered. Before Usha could ask, Grandmother exclaimed, “A spy! How did it find me? No matter, it cannot see, but all it heard its masters, too, have heard. They know the journal is here. The Garthist will be coming. We must get you away.”

Turning to a corner of the tent, Grandmother pulled out the traveling pack she had prepared and handed it to Usha. Taking it automatically, Usha managed to say, “But the Garthist are like the Slaves—empty. They are used by the Skeksis to carve stone and crystal. They wouldn’t hurt Gelfling.”

Already that sounded like a lie to Usha’s ears. Quickly wrapping the journal back up in its rags, Grandmother replied, “The Garthist may only be the size of a young Nebrie, but their claws can crush stone. They would have no trouble crushing Gelfling. Do not worry. I will turn them away—this old lady has some tricks in her pots. I’ll take care of everything.”

“Aren’t you coming with me?” Usha asked, frightened. Already there was a scuffling and clicking noise nearing the hut, the sound of claws scuttling over stone.

“I cannot,” Grandmother answered, clearly pained at this separation. Usha flung her arms around the old Gelfling’s neck. She could not find a voice to say good-bye, but the old woman understood her heart. Gently pulling away, Grandmother looked deep in Usha’s eyes and pleaded, “Now run.”

With tears in her eyes, and so many questions in her heart, Usha forced herself to turn away, to run and leave everything behind.

Chapter Four

The Forest

Usha ran for a long time before she allowed herself to stop and look around. This part of the forest was not completely unknown to her; it had to be somewhere between her village and the Orneth settlement, but there were no paths anywhere near her. Unconsciously, she had taken no paths or any routes she would normally have gone. No one would find her easily, even if they were looking. The only trouble was, she had no idea how far she had come, or exactly which direction she was facing—the tight-knit antari trees made it impossible to see the Great Sun in the morning sky. She was lost.

But not hopelessly so.

She just needed to get her bearings and she would know precisely where she was. Now that she had something to focus on, she pushed all the horrors she had experienced to the back of her mind. She would deal with them later, if she could bear to face them at all. Finding a suitable-looking tree, Usha prepared to climb to the top.

“Are you lost?”

She fell to the forest floor with a strangled cry. Usha looked about her fearfully, but could see no one. With visions of the Hunter in her head, she bolted into the bushes, only to trip and fall into the thorns.

“You do look uncomfortable.”

Usha looked around and spotted the speaker as he emerged from the shadows. He was a strange creature, tall and gangly, with a long face marked with spirals, large eyes, and long fair hair. He spoke again, his

voice kind and gentile, “I’ve a knack for helping people when they are lost.”

“Who, who are you?” Usha asked.

“I’m . . . a Wanderer,” he replied, waving his two left arms in a dismissive manner as he leaned against the thin tree, making it sway. “If you’re looking for direction, I believe I can help. You might find something you need in *that* direction.”

One left hand pointed over Usha’s head and through the trees. She looked but could not see anything useful. She turned back to ask, but the creature had gone. The woods certainly grew stranger the closer one traveled to the castle. Deciding her luck couldn’t get any worse, Usha stood, brushing the worst of the nettles off her skirt, and headed in the direction the man had indicated. It wasn’t long before she heard music, some kind of flute, surely. Following eagerly, she came upon a clearing. Here, a Gelfling sat by a stream, playing an old Gelfling tune. Flooded with relief, Usha ran forward, flinging her arms around the boy’s neck.

“Flynn!”

Flynn’s surprise could not have been more complete, suddenly finding Usha in his arms. He had just been thinking of her, though in his mind she had not been weeping. It took him quite some time before he could calm her down, and even then he held on to her as long as possible. Seeing her best friend had filled Usha with great relief and all her emotions came flooding out at once. She was glad to no longer be alone. Eventually, Usha was able to talk around her sniffles. “On, Flynn! It was absolutely terrifying! I was playing Hide with Hema, and then there was the monster! I ran as fast as I could, but Grandmother told me *such* things! I’ve got it, Flynn, I have the journal, and now I just don’t know what to do!”

Keeping his voice soft, like talking to a child, Flynn replied, “You’ve had a fright. I see that. Why don’t you start from the beginning?”

After a few deep breaths, Usha tried once again to make her words clear. “Flynn, I don’t think the Skeksis are really our friends. One of them attacked Hema in the woods and they’ve sent Garthist after Grandmother. They’re after the journal, but I don’t think they know I have it.”

This time, Usha’s words were clearer, but Flynn still didn’t understand. He said, “I can’t believe the Skeksis would harm Gelfling. You must be mistaken.”

“Flynn! I saw it,” Usha insisted, but it was clear Flynn would not be so easily persuaded. With a huff, she pulled the dirty bundle out of her bag and unwrapped it. The journal. Flynn looked at it skeptically. Offering him the book, Usha explained, “It’s Rian’s journal. He wasn’t a traitor, Flynn. He spoke the truth, and this will prove it.”

Cautiously, Flynn took the book. Something heavy fell out of the binding cloth. He asked, “What is that?”

“I don’t know. It’s some kind of black stone,” Usha replied, picking it up. The black came off on her fingers. Soot. Rubbing off the dirt, Usha uncovered some kind of white crystal, about the length of her palm and shaped like a teardrop. It must have something to do with the journal. Putting it in her satchel, Usha turned back to Flynn, who was flipping through the journal pages, pausing at certain paragraphs and wincing at pictures. She said, “Whether you believe me or not, you have to agree that Grandmother never would have given that to me if she didn’t believe it. She said it was extremely important.”

Flynn nodded. He knew Grandmother well, and seemed to accept that she would never lie about that. Finally, he looked at Usha and announced, “I’ll take you to Chief Dani. She’ll help. We’ll get it all figured out.”

Usha shook her head and stood, while Flynn looked at her in surprise. She declared resolutely, “No. Flynn, Grandmother made me promise I would go straight to Aughra’s mountain. I will not break my promise, not for anything.”

Flynn looked up at her, and she gave him a look that made it clear she wasn’t going to back down. With a sigh, he stood and stated, “Then I am coming, too.”

“But Flynn!” Usha objected. “You’re supposed to be up at the castle to begin guard duty tomorrow! You’ll be in trouble if you’re not there. If there really are creatures after me, it will be too dangerous to come.”

“All the more reason I should go,” Flynn replied. “You’re my best friend. I’m not going to let you go alone, no matter what I think about everything else.”

• • •

The darkening halls of the Castle of the Crystal were cold and unwelcoming. SkekUng's dark red robes brushed the dust on the floors as he walked, thinking only of the report he had to bring to Emperor skekSo, who wouldn't be pleased. SkekUng ran his clawlike fingers down his sharp beak; someone would be punished, and skekUng needed to be sure it wouldn't be him.

"I see your creatures failed!" a loud voice roared at him from behind. Without turning, he knew who it was—skekMal, one of the largest and fiercest of the Skeksis Turning.

SkekUng bowed with a sneer and answered in his sharp tone, "Ah, Hunter. Where do you go so quickly?"

"I've something for the Collector," skekMal grunted in reply, holding up a bag. A red stain was beginning to show through the fabric. "A Gelfling head. I thought he would like it for his collection."

SkekUng raised one sharp eyebrow. He smiled and said, "Ah, skekLach will be pleased, but the Emperor will be angered not to get the essence, which is unfortunate considering your blunder earlier."

"*You* are the Garthist's master," skekMal replied with a growl, gesturing with a sharp claw. "They failed. Both the Gelfling and the book slipped through their ranks."

Narrowing his small, sharp eyes, skekUng pointed out confidently, "My Garthist killed the one that hid the book, and brought captives from the village to the castle for their essence, for the Emperor. You were out hunting, were you not? And against orders. The Gelfling with the book must have gone right past you. You let it slip through your fingers."

The Hunter showed no fear. SkekMal replied, "My skills and your creatures may be useful together. I happen to know the spies report the Gelfling traitor is heading toward the Observatory."

SkekUng gave an involuntary shudder, knowing that "the Observatory" meant Aughra.

The Hunter continued, "We need not go there, but with your creatures and my skill, we could easily capture the Gelfling *and* the book."

SkekUng smiled. This had worked better than he hoped. The two scheming Skeksis walked away to plan. Once they were gone, a thin figure emerged from the shadows. SkekSil the Chamberlain nodded. A scheme of his own formed in his calculating brain. He would send the Crystal Bats,

of course. They made excellent spies. Unfortunately, they worked only at night. Perhaps skekTek would have some ideas. Yes, this could be good. He smiled cruelly, a pleased whimper escaping his throat.

• • •

Flyn and Usha spent the night in the forest. A long day of walking did not make sleeping on the lumpy forest floor any more pleasant. Usha dreamed of black and red, and blank eyes that watched. For breakfast, they shared what little food they had. There was no time to grab more before running. Usha hoped Grandmother was safe.

As they moved farther away from Usha's village, the pleasant forest turned mushy and dank. Even the air felt heavier and oppressive. Flyn did his best to lead, but he did not know the area any better than she did. The trees became old, black, and snarled, hung heavily with ivy and lichen. The quiet was so deep, the two small Gelfling dared not even speak or breathe too loudly, as if something could be listening. With everything she'd been through, Usha would not have been surprised to learn that the trees had ears.

Eventually the ground turned unreliable as the putrid waters of the Swamps of Sog began to seep through. They stayed at the outskirts of the swamps themselves. To venture farther would have been dangerous, and possibly deadly, without a guide or at least some idea of where the safe paths were. In the swamps, what appeared to be safe ground could suddenly drop you into a bog with no clear way of getting out again. Only the Drenchen clan understood the swamp, but they were unlikely to be anywhere around.

Flyn tested every inch of ground before allowing Usha to move forward. As he hopped to one solid-looking clump, the ground gave way, and suddenly he was up to his waist in muck. Panicked, Usha tried to help him out, but she only began to sink with him and he ordered her to back away. He was stuck.

"If you had a raffa vine, it would be easy to pull you out," some voice stated languidly.

Looking around Usha noticed a short, squat, hairy creature lying in a tuft of moss. He looked so covered in mud that he was hard to see, and

even harder to believe he was a Gelfling. He could only be a Drenchen—the short Gelfling race of lizard catchers—great with loyalty, but not so much with the personal hygiene. Usha asked urgently, “What’s a raffa vine?”

“It grows natural around here, and it’s stronger than rope,” the Drenchen replied.

“Could you help us find one?” Flyn asked quickly.

“There’s one right above you,” the Drenchen stated, “but it’s much too far to reach.”

Flyn scowled as he sunk a bit more, but Usha smiled and said, “Thank you!”

Quickly, she unfurled her wings. With a mighty flap, she flew up to the vine, pulling it back down with her to the ground. The Drenchen whistled, clearly impressed. He eyed her with much more interest; he’d obviously never seen anything like it. Usha blushed. She had never shown off her wings like that before. Throwing one end of the vine to Flyn, with considerable effort she pulled him out. He was safe but covered in mud.

“I’m Dilip,” the Drenchen declared, suddenly appearing beside them.

Flyn huffed and ignored him, but Usha bowed politely. “I’m Usha and this is Flyn. We’re headed for Aughra’s.”

Flyn looked shocked that she would so readily share that information. Dilip whistled again, once more impressed. He said, “Well, you’re not far. I’ve never met anyone crazy enough to climb to the Observatory. Can I come?”

“No!” Flyn announced firmly. “We are going to the Observatory on serious business. We do not need someone tagging along.”

“But—” Usha began to protest.

“We’re fine on our own,” Flyn insisted.

Dilip did not seem to mind. He only shrugged, saying, “If I were you, I’d stay clear of the dark green patches, look for the moss, and you’ll be fine. When the ground goes up, follow it.”

“Thank you,” Usha replied. Dilip merely shrugged and then turned and disappeared into the swamp.

Following Dilip’s advice, they were able to reach the base of Aughra’s mountain without further incident. Tired, and smelling of swamp, the two Gelfling looked at the solid stones of the mountain with

relief. Soon that joy vanished as the two inexperienced adventurers found the crags and slippery gravel of the mountainside excessively difficult to climb. Most of the easy paths they found led to nowhere or to staggering drops. Often, as they climbed, loose rocks tumbled down from above, giving them barely enough warning to hide their heads.

Finally, the ground became more level. Limpids—half plant, half animal creatures with long tentacles—scurried quickly away and hid as the Gelfling approached. Relieved, they began pushing their way past long, hanging tendrils of colored vines.

Suddenly, the vines began tightening. The Gelfling could not move. All at once, they were caught in a living net. Flyn shouted for help.

“Shtatyee,” announced a gruff voice.

Flyn was shocked into silence. Had the plant spoken? Usha understood, Grandmother had taught her a few words in the ancient language, though she couldn’t speak it. She replied quickly, “We’re Gelfling. I’m Usha. This is Flyn . . . Grandmother sent us.”

Finally, with a grunt, the vines relaxed, and the Gelfling fell to the ground. When they recovered, they found a rather incredible-looking woman standing over them. Wizen and gruff, dressed in multicolored shawls and skirts, she stood three-and-a-half feet tall, with ram horns curling out of her graying hair. Only one of her three eyes stared at them, the other two being blackened and useless. This was Aughra. With a curt nod, she ordered, “Boojay.”

Then she turned and walked away. Flummoxed, Flyn turned to Usha and shrugged. Rubbing a sore spot at her side, Usha explained, “We follow her.”

Chapter Five

The Observatory

Their first view of Aughra's Observatory left them speechless. Emerging from a tunnel in the mountainside, they found themselves in a rather large room, dominated by a massive system of rotating, spinning objects of all sizes and colors—a working model of this world's trisolar system. Ducking under one of the moving arms, Aughra walked to one of the many tables, filled with alchemical equipment, astrolabes, and other strange devices. This time using the more common language, she called back to the awestruck Gelfling, "What do you want?"

Flyn could only stare. Usha quickly curtsied, answering politely, "Please, Thra-Mother, I was told to bring you this, and that you would know what to do with it." Fumbling with her travel-stained satchel, she pulled the journal out, offering it with hope.

Aughra's eye glanced at it. She knew what it was. With a grunt, she said, "It is not for me to decide what Gelfling believe. Planets, stars . . . all moving, all telling Aughra something. It takes work, much work, to understand."

And she turned away. Usha's heart sunk. She had come all this way thinking that here would be the end, that Aughra would have all the answers. She got nothing. Searching for words, she asked in confusion, "But Thra-Mother, the book—it says the Skeksis are evil. Is it true?"

Aughra paused and turned back. She replied thoughtfully, mumbling, "Yes, could be. Two sides of the same coin."

This made no sense to either Gelfling. Aughra again began to walk away. Usha couldn't let her. Searching her mind, she remembered the

crystal. Quickly retrieving it, she held it out and said pleadingly, “We also have this!”

Aughra turned. This time her eye glimmered with interest. Carefully she took the small crystal and examined it. She whispered, “A shard, yes. Is it *the* Shard? Don’t know, don’t know. Aughra searched for it. Lost. Lost shard, lost Raunip, lost balance. Everything lost.”

“Please, Mother Aughra. I don’t know why I have been given these things, or what I am to do with them now. Darkness is growing. Gelfling are disappearing. Can you help?” Usha pleaded, her voice soft, eyes brimming with tears.

Aughra’s eye locked on the maiden, and something changed. She softened. Feelings seemed to stir in the old woman’s soul, and for a moment, Usha could see the Aughra of ancient tales—tales that spoke of another creature who had once called Aughra “Mother.” Shaking her head sadly, Aughra handed the shard back to Usha and replied in her gravelly voice, “It’s not Aughra’s story to tell. No. The division is about others.”

“What is the division?” Flyn asked, moving protectively closer to Usha.

Aughra shook herself from her thoughts and turned back to her table as she replied, “The division, the Crystal, many trine ago, all part of the story. The Shard was lost, Skeksis made other shards, all scattered. The answers *you* seek lie in the Valley of the Stones.”

“The Valley of the Stones!” Flyn exclaimed in surprise and not a little fear. “But that’s where the soul stealers come from!”

“Soul stealers?” Aughra asked, uncomprehending.

“Creatures who steal the Vayu—the living essence—of Gelfling with their song. Their voices can shake the very foundation of Thra,” Flyn replied. He was clearly surprised she hadn’t heard the stories.

Aughra laughed. With a mischievous gleam in her eye, she said, “Soul stealers, Mystics, urRu, in the Valley of the Stones they live. You ask Aughra what to do, Aughra tells. Valley of the Stones is where your path leads. Will you follow it, I wonder. Time has come to choose, Gelfling. What is your answer?”

Usha looked down at the crystal in her hand. It looked like such a small thing, and yet everything now seemed to have centered on it. She looked back at Aughra, not knowing what to say.

About the Authors

Vinnie Chiappini

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Vincent Chiappini is an attorney in the US Army. Mr. Chiappini has been published as a writer in *Let's Go France 2007*, as the editor of *Let's Go Italy 2008*, and as an author in the *Boston College Law Review*. He is a graduate of Harvard College and Boston College Law School.

What the *Dark Crystal* Means to Vinnie:

“The artful blend of solemn themes and playful humor in *The Dark Crystal* mirrors how I understand my own identity. On the one hand, the film is a grave, thoughtful story about an earnest underdog, the lone survivor of a genocide, who must resolve a Manichean battle between mysterious beings. On the other hand, Fizzgig's antics, Aughra's humorous dialogue, and Thra's distinctively “Jim Henson” feel make the movie a celebration. As a Pentagon lawyer who studied the classics but loves the Muppets and writing fantasy stories about Gelfling, that balance between the serious and the silly speaks to me.”

Greg Coles

State College, PA

Greg Coles is a graduate student studying English and rhetoric at Penn State University, where he also teaches first-year composition. He loves writing, music, baking, and occasionally hanging out the door of a moving vehicle in other countries.

What the *Dark Crystal* Means to Greg:

“I have always been enthralled by worlds not bound by the same rules as planet Earth, worlds where anything might happen and where the whole story hasn’t yet been written. For me, the world of *The Dark Crystal* is such a world. I fell in love with Thra because it came alive to me. It stopped feeling like a fiction someone made up and started feeling like another home I used to know.”

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Nancy Gray

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Nancy Gray lives in South Carolina with her husband and daughter. She graduated from the University of South Carolina with a BA in media arts and an English cognate. She started out as a graphic designer and then changed professions when she realized that writing was her calling. Her short story “Marrow” appeared in *Deep Space Terror*, and her stories “Hemophobia” and “Sleep Like the Dead” appeared in the *New Bedlam Project*.

What the *Dark Crystal* Means to Nancy:

“*The Dark Crystal* means a great deal to me because it is one of the movies that inspired me as a child, resulting in my major in media arts. It also made me want to write fantasy. The setting was so real that you could almost touch it. As a child, I wanted to work for The Jim Henson Company, and writing for the *Dark Crystal* universe is like fulfilling that dream.”

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J. M. (Joseph) Lee is a novelist, writing mentor, illustrator, and graphic designer with a background in linguistics and film. As a writer, he finds the most rewarding stories in fusion genre, from nostalgic historical fantasies to gritty sci-fi westerns. On the side, he enjoys dabbling in experimental short fiction and drinking a lot of coffee. He is represented by Erzsi Deak/Hen&ink Literary Studio.

What the *Dark Crystal* Means to Joseph:

“*The Dark Crystal* was my first Jim Henson experience after being coerced into a viewing by my father, who since has admitted he just thought I would like the ‘soundtrack performed by a bunch of giant crows.’ And I did! I’ve always been a fan of dark fantasy, but thinking

back on how early it was that *The Dark Crystal* became part of my VHS (!) library, I wonder which came first: the Skeksis or the egg. Even now, the depth of world and profundity has continued to reveal itself as I grow into my so-called adulthood.”

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Esther Palmer

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Esther Palmer is the author of two young-adult novels in the Alezia Chronicles series, currently available on Amazon.com. Her whole life has been about reading and writing. She has always been drawn to fantasy and the way it gives you a new perspective on the world.

What the *Dark Crystal* Means to Esther:

“*The Dark Crystal* is a fantasy that explores our human natures in the form of an ‘alien’ world, which makes it easier for us to accept. The split between the urRu and Skeksis highlights our dual natures between light and dark. The gentleness of the Gelfling and their naïveté is forced to evolve as they are thrust into a war they have no choice in or control over. It’s a story of our continuing struggles with the different parts of ourselves and how sometimes the dark side wins, but in the end, the good will triumph.”

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